

LITERARY TELENOVELS

When we start talking about television, we always have to keep in mind that the most important thing that defines a programme is the markers of the number of viewers. This is all the more important in the case of telenovels, not only because popularity is the force that makes it live or die, but also because of the interactive character of this genre, that allows the audience to change the story itself according to its interest. Beside the economic factor, we have to examine the cultural importance of these programmes, as well. The interaction of these two levels determines telenovels. In my study, I would like to emphasize the importance of this interaction in telenovels, a genre that provides an excellent example of the cultural role of television.

Itamar Even-Zohar in *Literature as Goods, Literature as Tools*¹ describes her concept about the functions of literature. She sees the basic functions of literature in two characteristics: literature as goods means that the elements of literature (texts, authors etc.) signify wealth and prestige. The things that cannot function as goods, cannot be characterized as culture. "Goods which cannot be evaluated by an accepted market cannot consequently have value, and therefore are not labeled – in this conception of culture – as »culture«. In this conception, one is therefore allowed to speak of entities as »having no culture«, if they are diagnosed as not being in possession of a defined set of required goods."²

Literature as tools means that the pieces of culture can be used as tools for the organization of life. They have two types: "passive" and "active" tools. "Passive" tools "are procedures with the help of which »reality« is analyzed, explained, and gets to »make sense« for human beings."³ "Active" tools "are procedures with the help of which an individual can handle any given situation, as well as produce any such situation. As Swindler puts it, culture is »a repertoire, or 'toolkit' of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct 'strategies of action'«".⁴

¹ Itamar Even-Zohar: *Literature as Goods, Literature as Tools*. In: *Neohelicon* XXIX (2002) 1, 75–83.

² *ibid*, 76.

³ *ibid*, 76.

⁴ *ibid*, 76.

Even-Zohar stresses that in her concept literature should be understood not only as texts, but also “as a network, a complex of activities”. “one must be freed from the conception of »literature« as only a collection of texts, chiefly canonical.”⁵ “In this conception, »literature« does not figure either as an »aesthetic« instrument or amusement for the privileged. It is, rather, conceived of the other way around, namely as a powerful social institution, one of the most basic instruments of most human societies, which has served to order and handle their repertoires for organizing their life.”⁶

This concept of culture allows us to speak about telenovels as part of literature, and as an action that is in close connection with other parts of the literary institute, maintaining dialogue with them and functioning in collaboration with them. This point of view helps us not only notice the classical references of telenovels, but also recognise their special role in our culture.

I would like to stress that there is a big difference between telenovels and soap operas. There is a geographical distance between them (soap opera is the American, telenovela is the Brazilian – Latin-American name of television series), and there are also some elementary characters of the genres. The most visible difference is that telenovels have an end, while soap operas can be continued for years. This is in connection with the origin of the series. Soap operas were developed from commercials, the first of which appeared in the radio. One of them was *Amos and Andy*, a popular series about two African-American men, that was a toothpaste ad. Procter and Gamble saw the opportunity in this project, and started to advertise their products the same way. This is why they are called soap operas. Nowadays we can also find commercials in series, not only in soap operas, but in other films, as well.

The roots of the telenovels can also be found in the radio series. The difference is that when the genre was adapted to TV, the subject was not submitted to a consumer ideology but to a social one. The first telenovels were adaptations of classic and popular novels, so as to bring literature to those Brazilians, who cannot buy any books or cannot even read.

The classical literary roots of the telenovels signifies those first adaptations of novels, and they appear in the main characteristics of the genre. Rose Calza⁷ drew attention to the connection between the structure of the telenovels and the way the great novels of the 18th and 19th centuries were read. Ferenc Pál⁸ speaks about their

⁵ *ibid*, 77.

⁶ *ibid*, 80.

⁷ Rose Calza: *O Que é Telenovela*. Editora Brasiliense, São Paulo, 1996.

⁸ Ferenc Pál: *The Novel of the Future; Is It the Telenovel?* In: www.filmkultura.iif.hu/articles/essays/telenove.en.html

connection with the medieval romance. These similarities appear in the structure of these narratives: the conflicts of the story have to be organised in a way that keeps the reader/viewer on reading/watching tv. The story has to keep their interest awake, so as to get the viewer to sit in front of the television next day same time.

This heritage of the serial literary classics in telenovels strengthens the function of goods, the concept of Even-Zohar. Telenovels have to use the classical instruments of serial narratives, to get more viewers and keep those who already watch them. The valuability of a programme depends on the number of its viewers. But the connection with the classical literature gives other functions to the telenovels, that enrich their function as tools.

When the first telenovels appeared in Hungary, Zoltán Rózsa⁹ noticed that although they created a new visual genre, they satisfied old claims of the audience. They gratificated the need for collective literature, such as the epic, the myths, the medieval tale of chivalry, the picaresque, the serial novels of the 18th and 19th century or the popular folk books. Rózsa thinks that telenovels saved these genres onto the screen.

Rose Calza describes telenovels as a mixture of the heritage of different genres: "Most of the time the result is a mixture of the tradition of radio, a cabbage of literature, and stereotypes of cinema, subordinated to a number of chematic rules specified less by aesthetic options and more by economic pressure, or rather the needs of commercial TV."¹⁰ She says, telenovel is an "inter-semiotic entertaining spectacular".¹¹

This description underlines both functions of telenovels as goods and as tools. To be valuable goods, telenovels have to serve as perfect tools. Nowadays they have to satisfy not only the needs of the illiterate audience, but also other layers of TV viewers (the medium class, male viewers, etc.). Because of this need, telenovels have a special timetable: the one at six o'clock for grandparents and children, the one at seven o'clock is for teens, and the one at eight o'clock is for adults. Especially these last ones have to satisfy not only the needs of housewives, but also that of a wider group of viewers. To be able to serve these claims, they use the toolkit of other genres. In the followings, I would like to show an example of how telenovels use elements of classical pieces of literature, and how they communicate with them in order to satisfy their huge number of viewers.

⁹ Zoltán Rózsa: *Száznyolcvan folytatásban csúcsidőben*. In: Filmvilág, 1982/12. 59–61.

¹⁰ „na maioria das vezes o resultado é uma mistura de tradição do rádio, sucata de literatura e clichês cinematográficos, submetida a um conjunto primário de regras esquemáticas impostas menos por opções estéticas e mais por pressões econômicas, ou seja, pelas necessidades da TV comercial.” Rose Calza, 8.

¹¹ „espetáculo intersemiótico de entretenimento” Rose Calza, 13.

This connection between telenovels and classical novels is very explicit in the characters of the stories. Many times, they are borrowed from literary texts, mostly from classical, but 'popular' texts. 'Popular' here means well-known, but, not necessarily well-read. These elements do not function as literary texts, but as topoi, so that the audience doesn't have to know their origins to be able to recognise that the character has been borrowed, and has its own story, that is brought to the actual narrative by them.

To see this function clearly, I collected some examples from a telenovel rather interesting. *Padre Coraje*¹² is an Argentine series, a quite perfect one, not only because of its technical professionalism, but also because of its energetic, compact, clear-cut story, interesting characters and primarily because of its fascinating communication with literary texts, which is clearly seen in its characters. Here are the characters that refer most explicitly to a literary tradition.

Coraje (Gabriel Jauregui, Padre Coraje), the 'Saviour'

The protagonist of this series has three names, because of his quite complicated life (what else could be the basis of a telenovel?). He was an orphan and used to be an honest bandit with his closest friends, Santo and Mercedes. His nickname is Coraje (meaning brave), and nobody knew them, because they always wore a long, hooded coat and looked like a monk's cowl.

Coraje resembles Robin Hood, he is an honest bandit, who helps the poor, a kind of out-of-law hero. But he is never called by this name, only his friend, Santo (see below). But he is also called 'The Pilgrim' by Manuel Costa (the main villain, his biggest enemy). Manuel knows about a sacred book, in which the story of 'The New World' (La Cruz) is written, and in which the coming of 'The Pilgrim', who brings new order is mentioned. Manuel is the lord of La Cruz, so he thinks he should find this Pilgrim, and kill him. 'The Pilgrim' is Coraje, so Manuel's main motivation during the whole story is to kill him.

Coraje is a character inherited from the Bible: he is a special transformation of Jesus Christ, the savior of the world ('The New World'), the healer, the embodiment of the good. Coraje cured Ana, who lived in a wheelchair until Coraje came into the town. He also resuscitated a woman, who had died in childbirth, cured Ana's face, which was burned in a fire. And he saved his own child's life in the bellie of his mother, Clara, when she almost lost the baby. These miracles were done by a pray, while Coraje put his hand on the patient/dead person.

¹² *Padre Coraje*. Pol-ka, Yair Dori Communications. Argentina, 2004.

The theme of the Saviour is strengthened by the element of sacrifice, as well. Coraje leads a revolution in La Cruz, and when military forces arrive in the town, they plan to execute Coraje. Naturally, in the last moment he is saved by Juan Perón. Coraje almost dies for the town, being the saviour of the 'New World'. The act of Sacrifice connects his character with the figure of Jesus. Coraje has a sign, that makes this connection clearer: he wears a cruciform scar on his back. This parallel between Coraje and Jesus Christ becomes explicit in the last episodes, when Manuel Costa (the infernal protagonist, see below) prepares a crucifix for Coraje, captures him and tries to kill him in the same way as Jesus was killed: Manuel scourges him, tortures him, puts a thorn crown onto his head and crucifies him. Coraje almost dies, when a miracle saves his life.

Manuel Costa, 'Faust'

The sacral character of Coraje is emphasized by his counterpart, Manuel Costa, who is the infernal protagonist of the telenovel. He is the owner of the sacred book, that includes the prophecy of 'The Pilgrim' (reference to the book of the Bible), and he is in connection with the Devil, who helps him (or, as it sometimes looks, who is helped by him) to destroy Coraje. He enters into a contract with the Devil, who promises that he gives him Coraje, if Manuel kills three people. After Manuel signes the contract with his blood, he always sees a dog snarling at him when Coraje is near him. The same dog shows him the persons he has to kill. Manuel does not use any weapons for his murders, except for his teeth. In these murders Manuel identifies himself with the Devil, that appears in the form of a dog. In Goethe's *Faust* the Devil also appears in the shape of a dog.

Manuel Costa represents the Faust theme in this telenovel. The contract with the Devil has been written up in literature many times, in many forms, but this telenovel does not try to fit to one adaptation. The most important in this genre is to refer to literary themes, not to texts. They bring topoi onto the screen. The viewers can recognize Faust by those special elements from which this character is built. There has to be an embodiment of the Devil, a contract that should be signed with blood, and other small elements that can be borrowed from other adaptations of the theme.

The embodiment of the Devil, as I have mentioned earlier, is usually realized in the shape of a dog. But when the act of signing the contract happens, the figure with whom Manuel has a discussion is in a human shape, but does not have a visible body, because it appears in a monk's cowl with a hood so big, that we cannot see his face. This embodiment refers to the character of Coraje, the divine figure of the story, and emphasises his sacredness and his connection with Jesus, by showing him in perfect opposition with the Devil. In Marlowe's

Doctor Faustus Mephistophilis also appears in monk's clothes, because when he first appears in his infernal shape, Faustus asks him to leave and come back in a monk's figure.

"I charge thee to returne, and change thy shape,
thou art too ugly to attend on me:
Go and returne an old *Franciscan* Frier,
That holy shape becomes a devill best."¹³

In *Padre Coraje* this action leaves the ironic taste of the original text by the explicit opposition with *Coraje*, that it refers to.

The place where the agreement is made is significant, as well. Manuel and his friends, the nobles, who established *La Cruz* had a secret sect, and the place, where they had met is a huge hall, a rotunda under the town's main square. From the house of each members of the sect a tunnel leads to this rotunda. In the middle of the room there is a round table sectioned for the members, with a sign of the crucifix in each section. This is a sacral place, where the most important actions of the story happen. In each telenovel we can find a place like this. It may be the house, where the protagonists' parents live (an archetypical mother and father), a house, where the characters meet, etc. As Tímea Antalóczy sais, "an archetypical place, that can be identified as the geographical and psychic center of energy, the meeting point of the strings of the story, and last but not least a dramaturgical center, at the same time."¹⁴

In this series the rotunda emphasizes the sacrality of this central point. The circle is a shape, that protects from the Devil. For example, in Goethe's *Faust* the witch stands Faust into a circle, when she gives him a magic drink, because Faust would be destroyed by the immense power of the infernal action without the protection of the circle. When Manuel 'fights' with 'The Mother', Amanda, the protective force of the circle can be seen very explicitly. Amanda is tempted by the Devil, but she resists, and kills herself instead of accepting the Devil's offer of a happy and long life. Interestingly she sticks a knife into her chest sitting on the round table, and then falls onto it. In the last picture of this scene, we see Amanda on the table and Manuel on the floor lying next to each other: Amanda inside and Manuel outside the circle.

¹³ Christopher Marlowe: *The Tragedie of Doctor Faustus* (B Text, 1616) Ed: Hilary Binda. www.perseus.tufts.edu/Texts/fasustus.html, 1/3.

¹⁴ „archetipikus hely, ami egyszerre tekinthető a cselekmény földrajzi és lelki energiaközpontjának, a meseszálak találkozási pontjának s nem utolsósorban dramaturgiai központjának. Tímea Antalóczy: *A szappanoperák virtuális világa*. In: *Jelkép*, 2001/2. 74.

The character of Manuel brings classical elements into the telenovel, but as Rose Calza mentioned it, a telenovel is a mixture of different cultural spheres. When Manuel is under the force of the Devil (when he murders or speaks about the murder), his eyes change their colour: they become white. This is a heritage of the cinema: the popular films about innocent persons occupied by the Devil offer many typical visual effects for these scenes. With the use of these schemes, the audience would be sure about what they are watching. If Manuel has white eyes, like the protagonist of a recent horror film, one could easily recognise the presence of the Devil.

Santo Tomini, 'Robin Hood'

Santo is one of Coraje's best friends, he used to be a member of the bandit group. He was also an orphan, he is like a brother of Coraje. He is always next to him, helps him, but he is not a heroic protagonist, he is much more a kind helper of Coraje. As I have mentioned before, the bandit group of Coraje reminds to the group of Robin Hood. But this name is used only in the case of Santo: his wife, Messina says to him sometimes: "You're like a real Robin Hood."

The legend of Robin Hood is written in some ballads and is also mentioned in Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, but this figure has never appeared as the protagonist of a classical, canonised piece of art. We can say that this figure is much more of a popular legend, than a reference to the so called high-art of literature. This opinion might sound too brave, but I would only like to underline the difference between the origins of the last two themes (the Saviour and Faust) and the topic of Robin Hood. All these figures are popular enough to be used in a film like this. But it is important, that in the first two cases the origins of the themes were from a 'higher' literary tradition than the figure of Robin Hood.

This difference of the original texts appears in the role of these characters in this telenovel. While Coraje and Manuel constitute the sacral, misterious level of the story, Santo as Robin Hood is on the level of the adventure. The literary origin is on a 'lower' level, and the character is on a lower level of the story. Santo represents a lower level of the story by the actions he is part of (he is not the part of the main story line, but some other accessory events), this is strengthened by his connection to the theme of Robin Hood.

Pedro Olmos Rey, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

Pedro is the husband of the third person of Coraje's bandit group, Mercedes. Pedro is ill, he has a split personality: in one moment he is a kind person,

in the next moment he is an aggressive murderer. These two personalities are fighting with each other very expressively: in these scenes we can see two Pedros: the good one is frightened, while the bad one is rude and he is always smoking. When Pedro is 'alone', but his aggressive self is ruling him, he is smoking, too. This small gesture makes it easy to realize, who is acting.

Doubled personality also has a literary tradition. The best known text is Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.¹⁵ Pedro's status in the story (he is a supporting character) and his literary origins connect him with Santo. Here we can see the same situation: the popular register of literature is adapted into the 'popular' level of the telenovel.¹⁶

There can be found many other literary elements in other characters as well. I have here presented only those, in which the literary roots appear in the most explicit way. These characters function as literary themes, and they have this same property in each episode. In the other characters we can recognise literary elements too, but it depends on the actual scene, so it's not a permanent characteristic of them.

We can say, that literary roots are quite important in the characters. *Padre Coraje* is a very good example of this phenomenon, but we can find examples in other series, too. For example, in the Mexican telenovel, *Las Vias del Amor*,¹⁷ a young prostitute is called Lolita. She has a relationship with an old man, but nothing else could be found in her character that connects her with the figure of Nabokov's *Lolita*. But her name and her relationship with the old man is enough to connect her with the literary theme, and to recognize her character in the first moments of the series.

The characters refer to a literary topos, and by this reference the audience can easily identify them, they know their main characteristics by it and know the ending of their story. These characters are built up on the basis of their relationship with the literary tradition. We know in the first moment, that Lolita has sexual importance (she is a prostitute in the series), and is connected to an old man; we know that a man whose sign is a crucifix is a kind of Saviour (Coraje), and that his main enemy is the Devil, or a force that is in close connection with the infernal forces (Manuel).

¹⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson: *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Dover, New York, 1991.

¹⁶ 'popular' level of the telenovel: meaning that the subordinated story lines usually satisfy more popular needs than the main story. The supported characters can be comical, vulgar, etc. In this case they represent the adventure (Santo) and the thriller (Pedro).

¹⁷ *Las Vias del Amor*. Televisa, Mexico, 2002.

Dialogues have special importance in telenovels. “the persons »are« only because they »speak« in many modes, to get emotions and information to us.”¹⁸ – sais Rose Calza. The characters ‘are’, because they ‘speak’, because they maintain a dialogue with each other, and, as we can see from the examples, with the literary tradition. These characters exist in relations, they are only a collection of literary patterns.

The audience of the telenovels, of course usually does not know (and does not have to know) the literary origins of the recited themes. However, they know that they are cited. These themes have such a great popularity, that one does not have to know the origin of it in order to understand the intertextuality, or in a Genettien system, its hypertextuality. One only has to know that an old story of a character exists (Faust for example), which is used in the telenovel. (The references to the Bible are different, of course, where the origin of the borrowed texts is well-known.) Recognising known figures and the completion of their stories in the expected way can give gratification to the audience. If they like watching it, the commercial markers of the telenovel will rise, giving a financial base for the telenovel.

The important for us is that these series mediate literary themes to the audience, and by this action, keep these stories alive. Stephen Greenblatt¹⁹ calls these cultural elements the pieces of social energy, that is represented on the stage, and by that action the stage renews this energy and circulates it back to the audience.

If we watch this cultural action from the point of view of Itamar Even-Zohar, we can say that the tool function of telenovels is this circulation of literary themes. They circulate them not only through ages (what Greenblatt talks about), but also among cultural levels. The first telenovels brought literature to the illiterate audience. By now, this function has been changed, but it has not died: they transform literary texts and bring them to their immense audience.

In the case of *Padre Coraje* this action is very explicit. The main characters can be understood by the tradition, but at the same time, the themes are transformed, given new life, and circulated to the audience. Telenovel is a very important genre of television culture that it appears in the whole world. It has a huge group of audience, its cultural role is incontestable. The economic power that gives life to this genre and its function as goods determines the characteristics of it, and by this action it can occupy its role as a cultural tool.

¹⁸ „os personagens só »são« porque »falam« de muitas maneiras, fazendo chegar até nós emoção é informação.” Rose Calza, 32.

¹⁹ Stephen Greenblatt: *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Berkeley: University of California Press, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.

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