

Latin America's Contested Pasts in Telenovelas and TV Series: A Cross-Sector Dialogue between Academia, Entertainment, and Society

Conference at the German Historical Institute in Washington DC, September 7–8, 2023, organized in collaboration with GUMELAB, Free University of Berlin (Geschichtsvermittlung durch Unterhaltungsmedien in Lateinamerika: Labor für Erinnerungsforschung und digitale Methoden). Conveners: Mónica Contreras Saiz (Free University of Berlin/GUMELAB), Simone Lässig (GHI Washington), Stefan Rinke (Free University of Berlin/GUMELAB). Additional support provided by the Goethe-Institut, Washington. Participants: June Carolyn Erlick (Harvard University), Juan Camilo Ferrand (Ferrand Stories), Delia González de Reufels (University of Bremen), Edward Goyeneche Gómez (Universidad de La Sabana), Andreas Gutzeit (Story House Productions), Claudia Lagos (Universidad de Chile), Tatjana Louis (Universidad de los Andes), Holle Meding (GUMELAB), Hannah Müsseemann (GUMELAB), Leonardo Pachon (Universidad de Antioquia), Jimena Perry (Iona University), Juan Piñon (New York University/OBITEL), Enrique Uribe-Jongbloed (University of Cardiff/Universidad Externado de Colombia), María Elena Wood (Wood Producciones).

The burgeoning proliferation of telenovelas and TV series delving into the recent history of Latin America and their expanding global influence served as the impetus for the interdisciplinary research initiative known as GUMELAB (the acronym, in German, of Transfer of History through Entertainment Media in Latin America: Laboratory for Memory and Digital Media Research), hosted at the Free University

of Berlin. This initiative, supported by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundeministerium für Bildung und Forschung), recognizes the significance of these cultural products as vehicles of historical memory, shaping the collective consciousness and political ethos not only within national borders but also across international audiences.

GUMELAB conceptualized the conference on “Latin America’s Contested Pasts in Telenovelas and TV Series” in collaboration with the GHI to foster an inclusive dialogue about this art form among academia, the entertainment industry, civil society organizations, and television viewers. The conference provided a platform for exploring the complex intersections of history, entertainment, and societal narratives, beginning with a kickoff event open to the public. This event, titled “TV Series and the Public Memory of Colonia Dignidad: An Interdisciplinary Conversation and Screening about the German-Chilean TV Series *Dignity*,” was held at the Goethe-Institut in Washington, and was part of a broader series of events on public memory and memorial culture co-organized by the GHI and the Goethe-Institut. It included the screening of three clips from the German-Chilean television program “Dignity” (Joyn/MEGA, 2019), an eight-episode television series delving into the history of the Colonia Dignidad, a cult community established in Chile in the 1950s by German emigrants which became notorious for both the sexual abuse of its youngest residents and for its leaders’ collaboration with the right-wing Pinochet government to facilitate the torture and execution of the regime’s political opponents.

Following the screening, GUMELAB researchers Stefan Rinke and Holle Meding interviewed the series’ producers, María Elena Wood and Andreas Gutzeit, who discussed their motivations for exploring Colonia Dignidad’s history and its links to the Pinochet dictatorship on television, highlighting the challenges of balancing fiction and reality in a historical

context. A central theme in the discussion revolved around the role of fiction in portraying historical events. Gutzeit, the program's showrunner, emphasized that his historical productions prioritize emotional truth over factual accuracy, stating, "we are not looking for the factual truth but looking for emotional truth." Wood, a producer renowned for her work on series depicting recent Chilean history, echoed this sentiment, highlighting her practice of consulting archives to enhance her audiovisual projects. However, she acknowledged that sometimes sources are lacking or inaccessible, leading to the necessity of inventing elements to fill the gaps, a case where fiction can serve to complement historical narratives.

The conference the next day comprised two roundtable discussions and a presentation of the ongoing results of the GUMELAB project. The first roundtable, moderated by Mónica Contreras Saiz, brought together screenwriters, producers, and academics. The discussion commenced by delving into the significance of the commonly used disclaimer, "Any resemblance to the past is pure coincidence," prevalent in this genre of television. Beyond its practical function of legal protection, Juan Camilo Ferrand, a scriptwriter of Latin American telenovelas and series, emphasized that this disclaimer ensures the freedom to craft fiction. Gutzeit emphasized the appeal of incorporating real historical figures into television narratives. He noted that these characters resonate more with audiences as they provide recognizable reference points. Gutzeit further remarked, "we never truly encounter a story that has never been told before; rather, it's always a fresh perspective on a familiar narrative."

Expanding on this theme, Wood stressed the importance of adhering to legal protocols specific to each country when addressing legal cases in storytelling. She explained that in Chile, "true crime" documentaries can only be developed if

the individuals involved in the crime are public figures who have been officially tried and convicted. Wood argued that in instances where justice has not been served through formal legal action, fiction can provide a platform to rectify this imbalance. She concluded that reality-based TV series and telenovelas serve as a vehicle for vindication, particularly for victims of dictatorship. "In fiction, the guilty can face consequences for their actions," Wood affirmed, thus ensuring the preservation of honor and dignity for their victims. She emphasized the importance of acknowledging marginalized voices in history, such as those of slaves and women, noting that fiction provides the freedom to amplify these voices which may not be adequately represented in historical archives.

The selection of a particular historical narrative is far from arbitrary; rather, it reflects the personal interests and motivations of the creators involved. The discussion highlighted how the inception of such audiovisual projects is fundamentally shaped by the individual perspectives of their creators, transcending institutional and industrial frameworks. Whether they are scriptwriters or producers, creators are active social agents with distinct viewpoints on the subject matter they aim to explore. Wood further emphasized that this principle applies not only to fictional productions but also to documentary works. In both genres, an interpretation of the past is inherently embedded, challenging the notion of objectivity. As Wood succinctly put it, "It is impossible to remain neutral when telling stories."

Finally, the panel delved into the educational aspect of these productions. Ferrand emphasized that works addressing historical subjects go beyond mere entertainment; they possess educational value as they simplify complex historical narratives. For instance, when Ferrand penned the script for the renowned Colombian telenovela "Pablo Escobar, El patrón de mal," he aimed to craft a story

that would appeal to a wide audience, including “[my] father and [my] niece.” He argued this approach contributed to the telenovela’s success, as it made the storyline accessible to everyone. June Erlick, whose research focuses on the telenovela as a social phenomenon in Latin America, noted they can serve as historical teachers for generations who did not experience the events firsthand. She recounted the case of a 10-year-old Colombian boy who claimed to have learned about the historical event known as the Palace of Justice siege for the first time from “Pablo Escobar, El patrón de mal.” In contrast, Andreas Gutzeit asserted that while these productions do entertain, their primary objective is not necessarily educational. He believes that their ability to evoke emotions is what ultimately influences perceptions. Gutzeit explained that in his own productions, he prioritizes capturing the essence of the present rather than adhering strictly to historical accuracy. He contends that instilling moral values through storytelling can have a more profound impact on shaping individuals than simply learning from the past.

The following roundtable focused on methods for researching historical television fiction and was moderated by Hannah Müssemann. Experts in data science, communication science and history reflected on various aspects to consider in methodological designs for studying television fiction. Leonardo Pachón, an expert in data science, shared his work on a GUMELAB project which combines Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques and Big Data analysis to capture how impressions and information about telenovelas and TV series are shared on social networks. The research has the potential to track international viewing routes, identifying who watches what, where, and when, while one of the limitations is the ethical dilemma of working with data that, although publicly accessible, were not intended by their creators for research purposes.

Delia González de Reufels, a historian and editor of the German magazine *Research in Film and History*, discussed the use of historical archival material within television fiction, particularly in the form of “historical reenactments,” which are almost always removed from their original context. She argued for melding research fields such as media science, media history and media archeology to analyze this phenomenon, also known as “Bildmigration,” and its use in story plots. Juan Piñon, coordinator in the United States of the Ibero-American Observatory of Television Fiction (OBITEL), emphasized the systematization of television fiction production. He explained that OBITEL’s work in the United States is pivotal due to the presence there of a substantial and expanding Latino viewership, already exceeding 60 million. Moreover, drawing from his research on the intersection of corporate dynamics within Latin American transnational media and the established practices of U.S. Latino media, and its impact on Latino representations, he contended that despite changes in viewing formats, production contexts persistently involve white men narrating Latino stories.

Claudia Lagos, a researcher in television fiction from a gender perspective, discussed how fiction which challenges gender norms can effectively elevate issues onto the political agenda, as evidenced by the discourse surrounding gender violence and abortion, particularly when placed in frameworks drawing on feminism and theories of intersectionality. Enrique Uribe-Jongbloed, whose research delves into the portrayal of violence in fiction, discussed findings from audience studies, revealing significant fluctuations in the reception of violence based on gender, noting that scenes deemed highly violent by women may not have registered as such when first conceptualized by male writers, directors, producers, and other personnel. This underscores the imperative to reflect on the ethical responsibility of fiction—what is represented and how—given its profound impact on collective memory. In concluding remarks,

Edward Goyeneche-Gómez highlighted the influence audiovisual representation codes have on historical narratives. These codes tend to reflect contemporary viewpoints rather than faithfully depicting the past, illustrating present-day approaches to historical interpretation.

The event concluded with a workshop on the capacity of television productions like those considered to address controversial and traumatic issues, along with the associated risk of the re-victimization or stigmatization of the social actors depicted in them. Strategies to promote critical consumption of these historical fiction series were also discussed, as well as their impact on the current political landscape. The workshop followed the “world café” methodology, facilitating multiple conversations on complementary topics. Participants were divided into four groups, comprising members of television production teams, viewers previously interviewed for audience studies by GUMELAB, representatives of civil society organizations, and academics.

In response to the question of whether these series can serve as educational material, television production personnel emphasized the importance of distinguishing between responsible entertainment and education. They underscored that responsible entertainment involves contextualizing audiovisual products and focuses more on conveying emotional truths rather than presenting factual information. Conversely, education entails the teaching of concrete facts. Some academics argued that carefully selected TV series can play a complementary role in history education, provided appropriate strategies, including an investigation into their production contexts, are incorporated. Other scholars noted that the usefulness of TV series as pedagogical material may vary depending on the age of the target audience; they may be more relevant for young people, as these TV series are part of their frame of reference, but less pertinent for those with more life experience. Participants

from NGOs and viewers suggested television productions can effectively be used as pedagogical tools, serving as a springboard for addressing significant issues, prompting questions, and preparing future generations to be critical consumers of media.

With respect to controversial and traumatic topics, the members of television production teams emphasized that the depiction of sensitive historical events encompasses both the selection of whom to portray and the manner in which the events are depicted. It involves considering whether to solely depict those who experienced harm as victims or to delve into their entire life stories within the plot. Economic imperatives often influence these decisions, as not all productions are inclined to tackle sensitive issues. Conversely, NGOs and the academic sector highlighted the potential of involving victims in the creative process and listening to their perspectives, which can evoke gratitude or feelings of victimization, contingent upon the execution of this approach.

The conference and workshop provided a platform to delve into the intricate intersections of history, entertainment, and social narratives. Suggestions for critical engagement in the depiction of historical events included their integration into educational contexts, establishing guidelines to verify factual accuracy, and the formation of advisory groups for script development. The conference acknowledged the power of telenovelas and historical series to stimulate dialogue on contemporary issues and influence perceptions of the world, particularly among younger audiences. In summary, the conference underscored the importance of critically examining both the production and consumption of these television dramas, recognizing their role in shaping historical and social narratives.

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