



Political Controversies in Brazilian TV Fiction

Viewers' Interpretations of the *Telenovela Terra Nostra*

Mauro P. Porto
Tulane University

This article discusses the Brazilian *telenovela Terra Nostra*, a prime-time production of TV Globo. The *telenovela* presented a complex picture of nineteenth-century Brazilian politics and of the saga of Italian immigrants, with a plurality of perspectives about these themes. A series of focus group discussions with viewers of different social backgrounds, concentrating on the political messages of the *telenovela*, reveals the complexity of audience responses. The author finds that the *telenovela* played an "orientation role," providing interpretive frames that were often applied by viewers to current political issues. Even though they are frequently looked at with disdain, *telenovelas* have become key to understanding the dilemmas and perspectives of democratic politics in Brazil.

Keywords: *telenovelas; Brazilian television; Terra Nostra; audiences; political communication*

As several studies have shown, Brazilian soap operas, known as *telenovelas*, have played an active and important role in the discussion of political themes and events in different periods of the country's history

Author's Note: This article is part of my Ph.D. dissertation "Media Frames and Citizen Competence: Television and Audiences' Interpretations of Politics in Brazil," written while at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), in 2001. I am especially thankful to my advisor, Daniel Hallin, as well as to Michael Schudson, Ellen Seiter, Samuel Popkin, and Akos Rona-Tas for their comments. I am nevertheless the only one responsible for the text's shortcomings. I am also thankful to the Post-Graduate Federal Agency of the Brazilian Government (CAPES), to UCSD's Department of Communication, and to the Fundação de Empreendimentos Científicos e Tecnológicos for the financial support.

TELEVISION & NEW MEDIA
Vol. 6 No. 4, November 2005 342-359
DOI: 10.1177/1527476405279862
© 2005 Sage Publications

(Straubhaar 1988; Rubim 1989; Weber 1990; Lima 1993; Guazina 1997; Porto 1998, 2000; Hamburger 1999; La Pastina 1999). This original feature of television fiction in Brazil offers a good opportunity to explore the political role of entertainment and its relation to democratic politics. One of the questions that emerges in this context is, How do telenovelas frame the world of politics and how do such interpretive frames influence the process by which viewers make sense of political events and themes? To answer this question, this article presents a case study about the telenovela *Terra Nostra* (TV Globo 1999–2000), the most popular TV program at the time of my fieldwork in Brazil. Particular attention will be given to the political content of the fictional plot and its relation to the process by which viewers make sense of the world of politics.

The study presented in this article is based on two basic methodological procedures. First, a content analysis of the first forty-eight episodes of the telenovela was developed with the aim of identifying how politics was framed by the fictional text. Second, six focus groups were conducted with thirty-nine inhabitants of the Federal District in Brazil to investigate how audiences responded to some of the interpretive frames that were presented by the telenovela. I begin by introducing *Terra Nostra* and the main characteristics of its plot. I then analyze the political content of the telenovela and the interpretations of this content presented by the thirty-nine participants of the focus groups. In the conclusion, I discuss the implications of the findings for the debates about the relationship between entertainment and democracy in Brazil.

The Story Line

The telenovela *Terra Nostra* was written by Benedito Ruy Barbosa, one of the better-known and most successful telenovela writers in Brazil. The telenovela was broadcast by TV Globo in prime time between approximately 8:50 p.m. and 9:50 p.m. and had its first episode aired on September 20, 1999. *Terra Nostra* was the most watched TV program in Brazil at the time of the fieldwork. In its first two months, *Terra Nostra* was watched by an average of 46 percent of all Brazilian households with television sets and by 64 percent of the households with television sets on. These ratings were even higher in the Federal District, where the fieldwork took place (57 percent and 76 percent, respectively; Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics 1999).

The initial plot of *Terra Nostra* was set in the end of the nineteenth century and dealt with the saga of Italian immigrants who came to Brazil to work in the plantations of “coffee barons,” the powerful landowners that dominated the politics of the time. Following the abolition of slavery in 1888, landowners replaced the labor force of former African slaves by salaried

European immigrants. Italian workers were brought in to work in the fields, mainly in the harvest of coffee, which was at that time the main product of Brazil's economy. It is in this historical context that the plot of the telenovela develops.

The story begins with a ship carrying Italian immigrants to Brazil.¹ The two main protagonists of the telenovela, the young couple Matheu (Thiago Lacerda) and Juliana (Ana Paula Arósio), meet on the vessel and fall in love. He is coming to Brazil to work on a coffee plantation, and she is following her parents, who planned to join a friend who had immigrated to Brazil years before. During the trip, a plague spreads among the immigrants, killing Juliana's parents. In the chaos of the disembarkation in Brazil, Matheu and Juliana lose each other. Juliana meets her father's friend, the wealthy banker Francesco (Raul Cortez), and goes to live in his house. Matheu follows several families of immigrants to the farm of Gumerindo (Antônio Fagundes), the coffee baron who had hired them. The telenovela centers around two main locations: Gumerindo's farm, where his family (a wife and two daughters), Matheu, and the remaining immigrants live; and Francesco's house in the capital, where his family (a wife and son) and Juliana live. The main story line of the initial phase of the telenovela centers on the separate lives of Matheu and Juliana, their passion and desire to reunite, and the circumstances that only work to separate them.

As it always happens with television melodramas, several subplots develop simultaneously to this main story line. In the case of Brazilian telenovelas, these subplots frequently include the discussion of political and social issues. As we will see, *Terra Nostra* was no exception. The fictional text contained several references to political themes, as well as comments on historical events of the late nineteenth century. This article focuses on this political content of the telenovela and on its reception by the participants of the focus groups.

The Political Content: Brazil at the End of the Nineteenth Century

In this section, I summarize the results of a content analysis of the first eight weeks of the telenovela, between September 20 and November 13, 1999. The sample includes forty-five complete episodes of the telenovela, totaling more than thirty-three hours of fictional drama.² The episodes of *Terra Nostra* included in the sample lasted for an average of forty-five minutes and were interrupted by fifteen minutes of commercials, which were usually broadcast in four breaks. For the analysis of the telenovela's text, I adopted the following procedures. I taped all episodes, registered their length, and identified all scenes in which political themes were discussed. For the purposes of this research, I define political themes as topics that

have explicit political connotations, particularly in relation to the sphere of the state and to conventional definitions of politics.³ I then coded all scenes dealing with political themes according to several variables and registered their length. The unit of analysis was therefore the scene, a continued tape segment that takes place in the same scenario or location.

Before identifying how the telenovela framed political issues, I begin with a basic question: how much political content was included in *Terra Nostra*? Although a great number of studies have identified the active role of telenovelas in the discussion of political and social issues (see Porto [2000] for a review), there are no studies available that actually specify how much political content was included or how frequently television fiction discussed political themes.⁴ In the period of analysis (September 20 to November 13, 1999), *Terra Nostra* presented fifty-four minutes of political content in fifty-seven scenes that appeared in twenty of the forty-five episodes. In other words, political themes, as previously defined, took up only 3 percent of the total airtime of the telenovela, appearing in 44 percent of the episodes. Thus, although Brazilian telenovelas deal with political and social problems in active ways, we should not overestimate the importance of this type of content for the fictional plots. Telenovelas are primarily melodramatic texts, emphasizing personal and love relations, and politics is rarely the central aspect of the narratives.⁵

Thus, most episodes of *Terra Nostra* in its first eight weeks did not include political content, and only a tiny part of the fictional text dealt explicitly with political issues. Nevertheless, as we will see, *Terra Nostra* played an active role in framing political events and issues, and viewers actively appropriated these interpretive frames when making sense of contemporary political issues. As I show next, two topics were particularly prominent in the telenovela: the portrayal of late nineteenth-century political events and the living conditions of Italian immigrants.

Political Events and the Situation of Italian Immigrants

The most important of the historical events portrayed by the telenovela was the “protocol rebellion,” when Italian immigrants and Brazilian citizens clashed in the streets over the terms of a protocol that was being negotiated by their governments. The issue was introduced on October 15 and took up 29 percent of the total time of the episode aired that day, with fifteen scenes dedicated to or dealing with the street conflicts. Besides the protocol issue, other political events were also included in the telenovela. For example, there were references to political figures of the period, including President Prudente de Moraes, meetings of coffee barons organized by the federal government, the abolition of slavery, and so forth.

The second most frequent political theme was the living conditions of Italian immigrants and the negotiations of their demands with the landowners who employed them. Most scenes in this category dealt with the negotiations between coffee baron Gumercindo and the Italian workers of his farm. After their arrival at the farm, the young protagonist, Matheu, and his friend, Bartolo (Antônio Calloni), become the representatives of the workers in these negotiations. Their main demand was land to allow families to plant their own crops and not depend so much on the grocery store owned by Gumercindo.⁶ The landowner opposed these demands, arguing that immigrants would be distracted by their crops and would abandon their duties in the coffee plantation. Thus, there was a reasonable balance between the two interpretive frames, one promoted by the landowner and one presented by his workers.

We can therefore conclude that the representation of the situation of Italian immigrants at the end of nineteenth century by the telenovela was plural. By presenting several interpretive frames, *Terra Nostra* painted a complex picture of the issue. Nevertheless, some critics have suggested that the telenovela softened intolerable aspects of Brazilian history. The television critic of the main Brazilian newspaper puts the issue in the following way:

It would be silly to take *Terra Nostra* as an overview of the immigration or an accurate picture of the history. Once more, it is a mixture of education and decoration [*é edulcorada*] and works as a background for a torrid love story. *Terra Nostra* is a melodrama and period. . . . *Terra Nostra's* immigration is clean, only remotely similar to the savagery registered by historical reports (de Barros e Silva 1999).

This criticism is partially correct. In fact, several scenes of *Terra Nostra* presented arguments that framed the situation of Italian immigrants as mistreatment, but these abuses were never shown. On the other hand, the families working on the farm of Gumercindo lived in good houses and frequently stated that life in Brazil was better than in Italy. This framing of the situation does not explain why more than one-third of the Italian immigrants who came to Brazil in the period of the telenovela returned to their homeland.⁷ Nevertheless, the critic fails to recognize that the representations of the telenovela were quite complex, framing the situation of Italian immigrants in different ways, including sharp criticism of mistreatments. The critic is also wrong in suggesting that because *Terra Nostra* was a melodrama, it would be unable to construct a rich and critical representation of Brazilian history. Commenting on the telenovela's role in the portrayal of Italian immigration in a newspaper article, writer Afonso Romano de Sant'Anna (1999, 8) stated,

It is for these and other reasons that I think the telenovela *Terra Nostra*, even though it is a mass product, having to please several interests, can, as the *feuilleton* romance of XIX century, provoke necessary discussions for Brazil to better understand itself. As a matter of fact, for a long time the *feuilleton* was seen with disdain, as a minor genre.

The writer suggests that *Terra Nostra* made a positive contribution to the discussions of Brazilian national identity. Like other serialized fictional genres—such as the *feuilletons* (the melodramas printed in installments by nineteenth-century French newspapers)—telenovelas work as complex public forums. As we have seen, *Terra Nostra*'s framing of the situation of Italian immigrants was quite rich and varied, presenting a plurality of points of view that had the potential of promoting a better understanding of the country and its history. Moreover, Sant'Anna identifies an elitist bias of much of the criticism about telenovelas, mainly the assumption that melodramatic genres necessarily trivialize or distort history.

The Reception of *Terra Nostra*: Viewers' Interpretations

As we have seen, *Terra Nostra* actively discussed several political issues and events, framing them in particular ways. In this section, I will present the results of an exploratory study on how inhabitants of the Brazilian capital evaluated the telenovela. Particular attention will be given to viewers' interpretations of one of the issues dealt by the fictional text: the representation of the political class.

In the reception analysis that follows, a basic hypothesis will be tested: viewers will tend not only to evaluate the telenovela in positive terms, but a significant number of them will also apply its interpretive frames to make sense of contemporary political issues. Thus, the study is based on the assumption that viewers see telenovelas not as fictional dramas distanced from their reality but as valuable source of "information" on how the world of politics works.

To investigate viewers' interpretations of *Terra Nostra*, I organized six focus groups with inhabitants of the Federal District. A total of thirty-nine individuals participated in these focus groups. The interviews took place in public schools in three locations, a high-income area (Plano Piloto), a middle-class town (Taguatinga), and a low-income area (Ceilândia). After the location was chosen, households surrounding it were randomly chosen and a member of the research team⁸ invited one person, also randomly chosen, to participate in the focus groups. The sample that resulted from these procedures was quite diverse, although it tended to include a higher proportion of males and younger individuals, as well as participants with

lower levels of income, when compared to the region's population. The number of participants in each group ranged from five to ten.

First Discussion: *Terra Nostra* as a Source of Interpretations

The discussions carried out with the focus groups' participants were divided into two parts, and each of them began with a taped segment of the telenovela. These two taped segments were presented as a way to focus the discussion on *Terra Nostra* and its political content and also to stimulate the debate. The first part of the session was based on a scene that included the participation of the banker, Francesco, his son, Marco Antônio (Marcelo Anthony), and his wife, Janete (Angela Vieira). The scene begins with Francesco reading a newspaper story about a bill approved by Congress to finance the hiring of 60,000 more Italian immigrants. Francesco complains that in the end, it is the people who pay the bill, framing the role of the state as an ally of the coffee barons. His wife then says that the blame was with Princess Izabel, who had signed the law that abolished slavery in 1888. Her son replies by saying that slavery was a shame for the country and that it ended not because of the princess but because of the struggles of slaves and abolitionists. After Janete leaves the room,⁹ Francesco and his son start a detailed discussion on several events of the period, including the illness of President Prudente de Moraes. Marco Antônio tells his father that monarchists were taking the opportunity of having a weak vice president in power to conspire to overthrow the republican government. The scene, which was completely devoted to the political events of the period, was aired on October 14, 1999, and lasted for three minutes and six seconds.

After participants watched this scene, the debate was opened with a general question: "what is your opinion about this scene from the telenovela?" The answers were coded according to positive or negative evaluations of the telenovela and its political content. In this first part of the debate, twenty-four of the thirty-nine participants participated in the discussion. Of the twenty-four participants, twenty evaluated the telenovela in general, or the scene in particular, in positive terms, while three presented negative evaluations and one did not specify his opinion. I will start with those who evaluated the scene and the telenovela in positive terms, presenting their arguments in some detail.

Five participants made short positive remarks about the scene and the telenovela, which is presented as "interesting," well produced, and as a good "source of information." But the most important interpretation, presented by eight participants, framed the telenovela as an accurate and important portrayal of the country's history, stressing, therefore, its pedagogical role. Here are some examples:

This novela is really very interesting. I don't understand anything about politics, but the novela is portraying the Brazil of that time. There were no more black slaves, but slavery continued with the Italians, even though they were paid, while the slaves were not. . . . It is a picture of Brazil, the landowners. . . . Only the rich have power; the poor class is always marginalized. I am not interested in politics, I hate it, but it is a picture of Brazil. (Ana¹⁰, female, sixty-seven years old and living in a high-income area)

It tells the truth about a historical fact. It talked about the abolition of slavery. Several books say that it was a generous act on the part of Princess Izabel, but in fact, there was an old struggle, and it was not only because of her act that everything was finished. (Lucia, female, twenty-seven, high-income area)

I don't watch the novela, but I think it is interesting that you start to know Brazilian history, how it was, how politics was, and the corrupt politicians of the time, right? (Daniel, male, nineteen, middle-income area)

Although the great majority of participants evaluated the telenovela or the scene positively, and though several stressed its pedagogical role in teaching its audience about Brazilian history, three participants rejected this interpretation. All three participated in one of the focus groups of the low-income area. The following exchange took place when the participants answered the first general question, and it includes the three negative evaluations:

Fábio: Although it is a novela and people say that novelas have no use, what I saw was a quite educational scene that showed Brazil's past. . . . That is why I like this type of program, which is an educational program. (male, eighteen)

Gustavo: Look, what the friend said makes sense, but I particularly don't like novelas because people worry a lot about novelas instead of worrying about more important things, as, for example, an educational program, understand? . . . That is all. (male, twenty-four)

Lucas: Well . . ., I think it would be interesting if they unite the question of the novela with the issue of conscience. Unfortunately, novelas have more of an entertainment role, of selling products instead of promoting conscience. (male, thirty)

Gustavo: Another thing I don't like in novelas is that they show prostitution too much. . . . If I had children, I would certainly not allow them to watch novelas.

Glória: I think this novela is playing a constructive role, telling a piece of our history, how was the coffee, the economic crisis of our country. (female, thirty)

Vicente: I agree that novelas embellish life too much; they create illusions, put in people's head the idea of a wealthy life, a good life, but in

reality, our day-to-day life is not what is shown on television. (male, eighteen)

Dalva: Although we see that most novelas deal with pure fiction, I think that the novela that is being shown now, *Terra Nostra*, teaches us a little bit about Brazil. (female, eighteen)

In this dialogue, three participants present negative evaluations about telenovelas after the positive remarks of the first answer. They suggest that this type of program is a distraction, an entertainment genre dominated by commercial imperatives that embellishes reality and prevents people from developing political consciousness. Telenovelas are opposed to more serious types of educational programming and are also criticized for dealing with betrayal and sexuality.

It is important to note that all three negative remarks were made by men (Gustavo, Lucas, and Vicente), while women (Dalva and Glória) presented two of the three positive evaluations. While a single dialogue obviously does not provide a reliable base from which to identify how different segments of the audience interpret telenovelas, research carried out in other contexts also provides support to some of the observations made here. For example, this article presents preliminary but consistent evidence suggesting that women play a more active role than men in evaluating the telenovela positively and in stressing its educational role. These findings are consistent with other studies, which found that women tend to use arguments about the "pedagogical value" of fictional genres to legitimize the pleasures they obtain from consuming them.¹¹ The interview transcripts also suggest that male viewers might have more of a propensity to reject telenovelas and their frames. Here, also, the preliminary findings of the focus groups are consistent with the results of other studies.¹² Nevertheless, it is important to note that the first participant in the dialogue, who praised the telenovelas' educational role, was a male and that several other males interpreted the telenovela in very positive terms.

Finally, it is important to stress that when answering the first general question, some viewers explained the importance of *Terra Nostra* for the process by which they make sense of contemporary political issues. Thus, the telenovela is not just seen as an accurate picture of the country's past. It is also conceived as an important source of interpretive frames for understanding current political realities. For example, two participants interpreted the telenovela in this way:

They spoke about the House representatives, that in everything they do we are the ones who pay the bill. It is very real. It is not something historical; it is something that happens nowadays. It is current. (Maria, female, twenty-one, high-income area)

It is all right that it is old stuff, but it is also part of our current lives, for learning, for knowing a bit more about politics, how it was before and how it can be, because this happens nowadays. (Sandra, female, twenty-four, middle-income area)

As she said, it is part of the history we are living day to day, the problem of the work force and of a tax load that is too heavy. (Luciana, female, forty-six, low-income area)

Thus, *Terra Nostra* not only played an “educational role” by teaching some viewers about the country’s history but also an “orientation role” by helping them interpret current political problems. This orientation role is evident in expressions such as “it happens nowadays. It is current”; “It is part of our current lives, for learning, for knowing a bit more about politics”; “It is part of the history we are living day to day”; and so forth. In the second discussion, which was based on a scene about the “delegitimation of politics,” I investigate in more detail this orientation role of *Terra Nostra*.

Second Discussion: *Terra Nostra* and the Delegitimation of Politics

In this section, I will investigate how this orientation role took place when viewers interpreted a specific theme. In particular, I investigate how the delegitimation of politics promoted by the telenovela was applied by viewers to interpret the realm of politics in general and the role of contemporary politicians in particular.

The second discussion was preceded by the presentation of a segment of *Terra Nostra* that included three scenes aired on October 21, 1999. The segment frames politicians by associating them with some basic features, including aversion to work, idleness, and questionable moral behavior. In one of the scenes, Augusto’s father says that his son is preparing himself very well to be a politician because “he is doing nothing.” He also says that Augusto is not interested in the farms of the family, suggesting that he does not like to work. In another scene, Augusto is shown with his mistress as a loafer. The telenovela implicitly suggests that those who choose to be politicians are the ones who do not like to work, who want to have a good and easy life, and who have no moral principles. This specific interpretive frame presented by *Terra Nostra* could therefore be summarized by the sentence, “Augusto is a typical politician.” Contrary to other themes discussed by the telenovela, politicians were represented in a restricted way, with a single delegitimizing frame.

The discussion of the scene was based on two questions. First, I asked about participants’ reactions to what they had just seen. Second, I focused the discussion on Augusto and the representation of politicians by asking participants whether they agreed that he was the character of *Terra Nostra*

that best fit the role of politician. The aim of this second, more specific question was to verify to what extent participants would apply the specific frame presented by the telenovela ("Augusto is a typical politician") to interpret the role of contemporary Brazilian politicians. From the thirty-nine participants who took part in the focus groups, twenty-nine participated in the discussion of the scene, and I coded their answers according to whether they interpreted politicians in terms of the dominant frame presented by the telenovela. Of these twenty-nine participants, fifteen applied the frame to contemporary Brazilian politicians, while only three disagreed and presented an alternative frame. From the eleven remaining participants, four retold what had happened in the scene, without specifying if they agreed with the frame or not, and seven provided unclear answers or raised other issues not directly related to the scene.

We can thus conclude that a significant number of the study's participants (52 percent of those who took part in the discussions) applied the interpretive frame presented by the telenovela as orientation devices when making sense of contemporary Brazilian politicians. This is a strong piece of evidence that *Terra Nostra* played an important orientation role for its viewers. The restricted form by which the fictional text represented politicians, including only a single negative and delegitimizing frame, became, therefore, a significant consideration for viewers when they interpreted the role and features of the political class.

It should be noted, though, that this "orientation role" does not imply a linear and simplistic conception of media effects. I am not suggesting that *Terra Nostra* "caused" people to think of politics and politicians in negative terms. Through feedback processes that are part and parcel of the industrial production of telenovelas, scriptwriters become frequently aware and attempt to reflect popular aspirations and values.¹³ As Campello de Souza (1989, 366) suggests, the Brazilian media reinforce a traditional aspect of the country's political culture: a deep-seated mistrust of politics and politicians. Thus, the interpretive frame "Augusto is a typical politician" can be seen as a local expression of the more general interpretive package available in the political culture that tends to frame politics in very negative terms. But although the interpretive frame of *Terra Nostra* did not "cause" viewers to think in a particular way, the fact that they consistently made use of it when interpreting contemporary politicians is very significant. Moreover, this finding might also contribute to explaining how hegemonic interpretive packages of the political culture are sustained, reproduced, or transformed in the daily lives of citizens.

The "orientation role" of the telenovela was present in all three locations, cutting across different social classes. Of the fifteen participants who applied the "Augusto is a typical politician" frame, five were from the

high-income area, five from the middle-income area, and five from the low-income area. As far as gender is concerned, nine of these fifteen participants were women and six men, suggesting once more that telenovelas' frames are especially relevant for the processes by which women make sense of politics.¹⁴ Thus, the interpretive patterns of the telenovela about politics and politicians played an important orientation role for the study's participants, independently of income and gender, although it was more frequent among women.¹⁵

"Ever Since That Time, Politicians Haven't Liked Working"

In this section, I describe in more detail the processes by which the majority of the participants (fifteen out of twenty-nine) used the "Augusto is a typical politician" frame when making sense of the world of politics. The orientation role of the fictional text was characterized by the fact that viewers frequently see telenovelas as authoritative sources of "information" about the world of politics. For example, three participants interpreted the scene in the following way:

It [the scene] proved once more that since the time people began talking about politics, politicians have done nothing. (Artur, male, eighteen, high-income area)

It showed that ever since then, politicians haven't liked working, just like now. (Jorge, male, nineteen, high-income area)

Once more, we are learning something, right? We can say that since that time, you already had the wrong people in politics, ever since. As he said, his son will be a House representative and he doesn't even like to work, right? From there, things had begun already to go the wrong way and that is why nowadays we suffer the consequences, because it has always been wrong and it will certainly end up wrong. (Sandra, female, twenty-five, middle-income area)

Participants therefore argued that *Terra Nostra* "proved," "demonstrated," or taught that "as today" or "since that time," politicians were idlers. These viewers do not see telenovelas as fictional texts that interpret reality in particular ways but rather as authoritative sources that have high levels of credibility. They also applied the telenovela's interpretive frames to make sense of contemporary political realities. These factors, credibility and "framing persuasiveness," are some of the key features of *Terra Nostra*'s orientation role.

Viewers also agreed with *Terra Nostra*'s framing of Augusto as representative of the kind of people who decide to become politicians. When asked whether they thought Augusto was the telenovela character that best fit the role of politician, some viewers responded in the following way:

Yes, because he is the only idler of the telenovela who doesn't want to work [laughs]. He is the only one. I don't watch a lot, but the parts I watch, I only see him. He is the only one who doesn't want to be near the wife, who doesn't want to work, but wants to gain money. Thus, the role of House representative fits only him in the novella. (Mônica, female, twenty-one, low-income area)

To be a politician, the guy doesn't need to make much effort. The people that go into politics are those people who don't want anything in life and that want to get on well, over everybody else. This is the idea. The reputation of politicians has always been very bad. They have a terrible image since that time. (Simone, female, forty-four, middle-income area)

There are still some politicians that want to do serious work, but I think the majority demonstrates the fact that was demonstrated by the scene. Unfortunately, this is still the reality. (Paulo, male, thirty, middle-income area)

All politicians enter politics thinking that politics means easy money. He [Augusto] doesn't want anything in life. He has his wife but lives with other women; he has his mistress. In other words, he studied, will be a politician. He will have his easy money. . . . If you analyze it [the scene], it is about current Brazilian politicians. (Luana, female, thirty-six, low-income area)

These participants make clear that they interpreted the character of Alfonso as the type of person that tends to become a professional politician. As Mônica and Simone put it, the role of House representative "fits only him," and the people that go into politics "are those people who don't want anything in life and that want to get on well." Or as Luana says, the majority of politicians demonstrate the fact that was demonstrated by the scene: "it is about current Brazilian politicians."

"Politicians are Necessary": Viewers' Alternative Frames

Not all viewers interpreted Brazilian politicians in terms of the negative frame presented by *Terra Nostra*. Three of twenty-nine participants who participated in the discussions presented alternative interpretations. For example, one participant strongly rejected the idea that Augusto was an accurate representation of the kind of people who usually decide to become professional politicians. When asked whether Augusto was the character that best fitted the role of politician, another participant responded in the following way:

Neuza: No!! [laughs].

Moderator: No?

Neuza: No way. He gives an awful performance as a politician.

Moderator: Why?

Neuza: Because he only thinks about women, he only wants to have the good life at the expense of his father, right? Thus, he cannot be a

politician. He only thinks about himself and about the bed!! (Female, twenty-three, middle-income area)

This comment directly challenges the type of interpretation that the fictional text promoted. The suggestion that Augusto could be a good politician is strongly rejected by the participant. The fact that Augusto is an idler and lives at the expenses of his father is not seen as a feature that would make him fit the role of a politician.

Conclusion

As we have seen, *Terra Nostra* played an active role in the representation of political events and themes of the late nineteenth century that had clear connections to contemporary Brazil. With the exception of one particular subject area (politics and politicians), the telenovela portrayed the country's past in a complex and plural form. In most cases, the topics were dealt from a variety of perspectives, presenting different interpretative frames about political and social problems. The political content of *Terra Nostra* also proved to be relevant to the processes by which viewers made sense of the world of politics. The analysis of the focus groups' discussions has shown that most viewers evaluated the political content in a positive way, stressing, for example, its pedagogical role in teaching audiences about the country's history. *Terra Nostra* also had an important "orientation role" by helping viewers interpret current political problems. These findings confirm that entertainment programs are an integral and important part of the public sphere, since they are "one means by which people engage at an intuitive and expressive level in a public dialogue about the direction of society" (Curran 1992, 102; see also Hallin 1994, 9; Tufté 2000, 229). In the specific case of Brazilian telenovelas, it has been pointed out that they offer audiences a type of public forum that frequently allows the articulation of citizenship and political emancipation (Vink 1988; Tufté 2000, 227–31).

Telenovelas have contributed to the democratization of Brazilian culture and politics by presenting a plurality of perspectives and actors that tend to be absent from or marginalized by TV news (Lins da Silva 1985, 114; Tufté 2000; Porto 2003). Nevertheless, studies about Brazilian telenovelas have failed to investigate instances in which they have promoted restricted forms of representation. The findings of the reception study reported in this article suggest that when presenting such a restricted content, with a single interpretive frame, telenovelas contribute to narrowing the range of interpretations available for viewers to make sense of political issues. As we have seen in the discussion about the representation of politics and politicians by *Terra Nostra*, most viewers applied the negative frame of the fictional text to understand contemporary Brazilian politicians. The simple

presence of this orientation role in viewers' responses does not prove that they would have interpreted the role of politicians in a different way if not exposed to the telenovela's frames. Nevertheless, the orientation role played by *Terra Nostra* suggests that the reason so few alternative views emerged in the focus groups' discussions might lie in the restricted form of the fictional text.

Terra Nostra presented a complex picture of nineteenth-century Brazilian politics and of the saga of Italian immigrants, with a plurality of perspectives about these themes. This active role of the telenovela demonstrates that television fiction has the potential to give audiences, particularly women, the ability to construct complex understandings about the country's past, present, and future. Because of their orientation role and their popularity, Brazilian telenovelas have become a central part of the processes by which ordinary citizens make sense of the world of politics. As a result, even though they are frequently looked at with disdain, telenovelas have become key to understanding the dilemmas and perspectives of democratic politics in Brazil.

Notes

1. *Terra Nostra* was the most expensive *telenovela* ever produced by TV Globo, with an estimated budget of US\$13.3 million dollars and with each chapter costing US\$48,000. Just the first two episodes, which were taped in England and in a rented ship, the SS *Shieldhall*, consumed US\$530,000. Because of its sophisticated production and the similarities between its first episodes and the well-known Hollywood motion picture, *Terra Nostra* became known as the "Brazilian *Titanic*" (Miragaya 1999, 8-9).

2. Three episodes of the period were not taped because of technical problems and are not included in the content analysis: September 21, October 2, and November 8.

3. Politics is, of course, a contested concept, and with my narrow definition, I do not intend to suggest that other themes are not political. For example, this chapter does not include an analysis of how gender and race were framed by the telenovela, although these issues have clear and important political implications. My focus is therefore on institutional politics within the sphere of the state (government, parties, elections, parliament, etc.), social issues (inequality, poverty, etc.), and conflicts in realm of civil society (labor disputes, social movements, etc.).

4. The main reason for this lapse in the literature might be the difficulties in defining "political content" and in measuring it through content analysis. Despite these difficulties, it is important to specify how frequently telenovelas deal with political issues and, more importantly, how the programs frame them.

5. A similar analysis about other telenovelas would, of course, reveal very different results. Some telenovelas were, in fact, centered on the world of politics, as narrowly defined by this study. In the case of *O Rei do Gado* (*The Cattle King*, TV

Globo, 1996–1997), for example, the main story line was directly linked to the struggles for agrarian reform by an important social movement (the Landless Movement), and one of the central characters was a senator (Hamburger 1999; La Pastina 1999). The telenovelas that are broadcast before presidential elections also seem to include more explicit political content (Rubim 1989; Weber 1990; Lima 1993; Porto 1998).

6. In one scene, Matheu appears speaking to the Italian workers and frames their demands in terms of justice. His speech defending the need of land for all families is aired with the “Internationale” in the background, the anthem of the international Communist movement. Most probably, few viewers noticed this metatextual commentary by *Terra Nostra* or were familiar with the “Internationale.” The scene, nevertheless, indicates the limitations of those approaches that conceive of telenovelas as inherently conservative, as reproducing the ideology of capital (e.g., Marcondes Filho 1986).

7. Numbers provided by Rubens Ricupero, grandson of Italian immigrants who came to Brazil in the period of the telenovela, in a newspaper interview (Ricupero 1999, 16). Ricupero is the secretary-general of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and a former minister of state.

8. The research activities were conducted with the assistance of ten undergraduate students from the University of Brasilia. I thank them for their contributions to this project.

9. As in other scenes, a female character appears to get bored by a conversation about politics and withdraws, reinforcing the notion that politics is a male-dominated social space.

10. The names of all participants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

11. In her excellent study of women’s consumption of romance novels, Radway (1991, 107–118) notes that the genre can be termed *compensatory fiction* because it fulfills two basic functions. Romances not only allow women to indulge in a fantasy that generates good feelings; they are also seen by them as reliable sources of factual information, teaching about geography and history. In maintaining this “reading for instruction” argument, the female readers search to legitimate an activity that would otherwise be seen as self-indulgent and frivolous, mainly by their skeptical husbands. Arguments about telenovelas’ pedagogical role seem to play a similar role for viewers, especially women, who can in this way legitimate the pleasures they obtain from watching the programs.

12. In his study about the domestic context of television viewing, Morley (1986) found that gender was the structural principal that worked across all the families interviewed. For example, men consistently tended to prefer and value positively “factual” programming, including news, while women, with some important exceptions, preferred fictional programs, such as soap operas (p. 162).

13. On the feedback process that characterizes the telenovelas’ production process, including surveys and focus groups with viewers, see Ortiz, Borelli, and Ramos (1989). But although some argue that telenovelas simply “capture,” rather than promote, viewers’ aspirations and interests (Lins da Silva 1993), it is important to stress that scriptwriters play an active role in the construction of the national identity in Brazil (see Porto 2000).

14. The higher number of females is not very significant in this case, though, because the number of women who took part in the discussions about the scene was also higher (fifteen women and fourteen men). Thus, it would be a mistake to suggest that the telenovelas play a significant role only among female viewers.

15. A word of caution is necessary at this point. These results cannot be generalized for several reasons. First, the sample was obviously too small to be representative of the population of the Federal District. Moreover, another shortcoming of the study is the fact that of the thirty-nine people who came to the focus groups' meetings, ten (26 percent) did not take part in the discussions. Thus, although a strong emphasis was given to creating a conversation-conducive environment, this effort had no effect in the case of ten participants.

References

- Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics. 1999. *Relatório AIP: Audiência Individual por Programa*. São Paulo, Brazil: Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics.
- Campello de Souza, M. 1989. The Brazilian "New Republic": Under the "Sword of Damocles." In *Democratizing Brazil*, edited by A. Stepan, 351-94. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Curran, J. 1992. Mass Media and Democracy Revisited. In *Mass Media and Society*, edited by J. Curran and M. Gurevitch, 81-119. New York: Arnold.
- de Barros e Silva, Fernando. 1999. Síndrome de "Amore Mio." *Folha de São Paulo*. November 14, p. 12.
- de Lima, V. A. 1993. Brazilian Television in the 1989 Presidential Campaign: Constructing a President. In *Television, Politics, and the Transition to Democracy in Latin America*, edited by T. Skidmore, 97-117. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- de Sant'Anna, Afonso Romano. 1999. Nossa Formação, Nossas Deformações. *O Globo*, October 13, p. 8.
- Guazina, L. 1997. Ficção Televisiva e Política: Um Estudo sobre a Telenovela Explode Coração. *Comunicação & Política*, 4 (2): 151-75.
- Hallin, D. 1994. *We Keep America on Top of the World: Television Journalism and the Public Sphere*. New York: Routledge.
- Hamburger, E. 1999. Politics and Intimacy in Brazilian Telenovelas. Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago.
- La Pastina, A. 1999. The Telenovela Way of Knowledge: An Ethnographic Reception Study Among Rural Viewers in Brazil. Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin.
- Lins da Silva, C. E. 1993. The Brazilian Case: Manipulation by the Media? In *Television, Politics, and the Transition to Democracy in Latin America*, edited by T. Skidmore, 137-44. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Marcondes Filho, C. 1986. A Telenovela e a Lógica do Capital. *Comunicação & Sociedade* 14:5-18.
- Miragaya, Fernando. 1999. Épico à Moda Brasileira. *Correio Braziliense*. September 19, pp. 8-9.

- Morley, D. 1986. *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*. London: Comedia.
- Ortiz, R., S. Borelli, and J. Ramos. 1989. *Telenovela: História e Produção*. São Paulo, Brazil: Brasiliense.
- Porto, M. 1998. Telenovelas and Politics in the 1994 Brazilian Presidential Election. *The Communication Review* 2 (4): 433–59.
- . 2000. Telenovelas, Política e Identidad National en Brasil. *Ecuador Debate*, no. 49:205–34.
- . 2003. Mass Media and Politics in Democratic Brazil. In *Brazil Since 1985: Economy, Polity and Society*, edited by M. D. Kinzo and J. Dunkerley, 288–313. London: Institute of Latin American Studies.
- Radway, J. 1991. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Ricupero, Rubens. 1999. Entrevista: Rubens Ricupero. *O Globo*, September 26, p. 16.
- Rubim, A. A. 1989. “Comunicação, Espaço Público e Eleições Presidenciais.” *Comunicação & Política* 9:7–21.
- Straubhaar, J. 1988. The Reflection of the Brazilian Political Opening in the Telenovela [soap opera], 1974–1985. *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 7:59–76.
- Tufte, T. 2000. *Living with the Rubbish Queen: Telenovelas, Culture and Modernity in Brazil*. Luton, UK: University of Luton Press.
- Vink, N. 1988. *The Telenovela and Emancipation: A Study on Television and Social Change in Brazil*. Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Royal Tropical Institute.
- Weber, M. H. 1990. “Pedagogias de Despolitização e Desqualificação da Política Brasileira: As Telenovelas da Globo nas Eleições Presidenciais de 1989.” *Comunicação & Política* 11:67–83.

Mauro P. Porto is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at Tulane University.