

# SERIES, TELENOVELAS AND SOAPS: TRAGEDY IN THE LIVING ROOM<sup>1</sup>

LEJLA PANJETA \*

## **Abstract**

The focus of this work is to establish the inherent features of the serial genres in television that emerged from literature and to discuss their importance and impact on the spectatorship. The rise and development of the serial genres will be discussed along with the growing influence on the society and individuals. How much do the genres of telenovelas and series differ in the context of cultural nuances and what is the genesis of the human urgency in retelling the melodramatic and tragic narratives? Enormous popularity deriving from these stories is reflected in the prime time broadcasting by Croatian, Serbian and Bosnian TV stations since 2002. The essay will explain the ontogenesis of the popularity, reflections and influences on societies and cultures, and features of this hybrid and changing genre of telenovelas and the most recent infatuation with Turkish serials in the TV region of West Balkans.

**Keywords:** serial literature and television, telenovela, soap opera, Turkish series, Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian series broadcast, Greek classical narrative and tragedy.

There is a common joke in Bosnia nowadays, made under the impression of the impact that Turkish series made in the last couple of years: it is said that when the Ottomans retreated in 19th century from Bosnia, they claimed: “We’ll come back. In the series!” The enormous popularity of these series can be witnessed if nothing else, just by looking at the TV program. There isn’t one public, state or private TV in Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia that has not at least one Turkish series in the daily schedule. The importance of debating this phenomenon rises from these facts.

The focus of this work is to establish the inherent features of the genre of series and discuss their importance and impact on society, politics and everyday life. We usually tend to address everything related to TV and sequel featured as series and soaps. This common presumption is wrong on so many levels, because the genre of sequels has many subgenres and mixed genres and they are constantly changing in the light of the new technologies of filmmaking, TV broadcast and demands of the market.

The popularity of sequels and *logies* (duology, trilogy, quadrilogy... overwhelming us from bookshops, tobacco shops, and commercials) today is at its peak not only in cinema and TV, but in literature as well. In fact the very first sequels can be found in the ancient storytelling. One of the first stories told in the serial manner is in *One thousand and one nights* or Arabian nights in which Scheherazade tells a story open ending it each night so she might live another day for her captor needs to hear how it’s to be continued. Many classic authors such as Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, or Flaubert published installments of their works in journals such as *Ruski Vesnik* or *Pickwick Club*. The first known e-book has emerged from the experiment with the new technologies in an epistolary form of a novel. It was created by Stephen King.

Many classic writers did their novels in sequels or rather series of individual novels. Nowadays bestsellers varying from supernatural, to children’s books, even pornographic (labeled as erotic) is done at

---

\* Lejla Panjeta, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor at the International University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Visual Arts and Communication Design. Email address: panjeta.lejla@bih.net.ba.

<sup>1</sup> The essay emerged from the research presented at the International Conference on Education and Culture at International University of Sarajevo, July 2013.

least in three sequels. Recycling ideas and the profit making are the major incentives for authors and publishers or production companies to continue working on the same stuff and make a sequel out of the perfectly normal compact composition. Anticipated sequels end up the storytelling before drama epiphany is reached and right on the edge of climax and/or falling action. That is way the resolution of the plot is to be anticipated. This technique in modern storytelling was invented in 19<sup>th</sup> century. Apart from creating the first the paperback Charles Dickens was the first author who made a serial when he deliberately left the character hanging from the cliff in the third chapter of 1860 novel *Great Expectations*. This novel was printed in sequels in a magazine *All the Year Round*. The dramaturgy device called cliffhanger is named after this invention.

One of the first cinema sequels is created by Fritz Lang within the German expressionist period. The protagonist Dr. Mabuse plays in a psychological-gothic horror. Similar to this, character sequels are popular in literature. Poirot, Marple, Sherlock Holmes, Robert Langdon and Harry Potter are characters that have many followers, and these days the supporters form small internet based armies of fans. In TV, the series are often made preempting the rights on the lead actors. They become the superstars whose character lives are usually followed with same ardor as their private lives.

In the documentary *Hollywood: The Rise of Television Series*<sup>2</sup>, one of the series' authors explains the difference between cinema and television. The TV is like a wife, a member of the family. It determines when we eat, when we go to sleep, how we plan our pastime, while the cinema is a one night stand mistress. This lucid and funny explanation is right to the point of defining why today's movies are artistically inferior to TV, why the TV smarts up, while the cinema, seriously lacking fresh narrative ideas is covering the downfall with mesmerizingly visual overwhelming technologies and mythology recycling.

Television is the media of the close up shoot. The life and the characters are set in the very center of our home, the TV is positioned in our living room, thus forming a major part of our lives and becoming a family member that determines our lives. But this addiction to icons is the process very different from going to cinema. The similar process is found in religious icons. We do not watch Gods. God is coming to us and watching us through the icon. And for TV phenomenon of our living room the process looks like this: We are not going anywhere, as much as it seems that we are watching them, no, it is the opposite: we are not visiting, the guests are coming, and like in the visits of our relatives, only an illusion of control exists. You have only the freedom to choose the channel, but not the freedom of choice. Self invited these are the characters whose lives have entered our lives through TV. Some more important, some less, but existing nevertheless in our living room.

It all started in the 30s on the radio, the form of sequel narrative taken by TV for the purposes of advertizing the sponsors of the show: Procter and Gamble, Colgate and other cleaning products covered the costs of the daily melodrama non prime time broadcast whose targeted audience were housewives. Therein lies the origin of the name soap operas. The whole concept of TV commercials emerged from this marketing experiment. The soaps ruled the TV screen worldwide in the 80s.<sup>3</sup>

The cable TV in the 90s sets other rules. Soaps are derogative terms, and series broadcasted in seasons are overtaking this throne in mass media. We pay not to have commercials interrupting the narrative and to choose what to see and when. Major broadcasters expanded to production companies, broadcasting and filmmaking at the same time. HBO, SHOWTIME owns some of the best cinema (in terms narrative screen merge, character and story complexity, production creativity, etc.). The best filmmaking from USA comes today in a format of serials.

For the spectatorship the illusion of choice is given by the remote control device, but taken away by the dramatic devise of suspense. TO BE CONTINUED (TBC) is the most inherent element of the series. It represents the suspense, as the most important feature of storytelling and the most important tool for sequel narrative. It is the cliffhanger dramatic construct that keep us glued to our favorite TV shows. What will happen next? It is not only the question our brain is posing, but is reflected in our body as well. The tension and anticipation bind us to the serials. That is when we shout expletives and bump the remote control. The real reason we do it is: we do not have control over the storytelling tool of suspense. And it is designed to boost up and keep up with our hormonal tension and pleasure the mind games reflected in our bodies make,

---

<sup>2</sup> *Hollywood: The Rise of Television Series (Hollywood: Le règne des séries)*: (2005), AGAT FILM & CIE and ARTE FRANCE, JIMMY, directors: Oliver Joyard and Loic Prigent

<sup>3</sup> Panjeta, L., Mazziotti, N., Spahić, B., & Sanchez, L. (2005). *Telenovela – fabrika ljubavi, Uvod u produkciju i žanr (Telenovela – La fabrica del amor, Introduccion al genero y a la produccion)*. Sarajevo Naklada Zoro & HEFT.

while we bear witness to other people's destinies and stories. Scheherazade saved her life because of this suspense tool of dramaturgy.

The adage "safety in numbers" applies here. In the world filled with insecurities and instability, reflected in the TV news as well, one hesitates to plunge into everything new. The contents of cable TV are not within our scopes of apprehension. When zapping (channel surfing) one often finds watching only the commercials while waiting to find the program of his own liking. The joy of entertainment in serials gives us the security in familiarity. Referring to our well know characters and familiar surroundings, we turn to our friends from the TV – our favorite series. It is somewhat discrepant that the series are followed because of our need for stability, when the very reason for enjoyment in them lies in the fact that we do not know what's going to happen in the TBC episode. This phenomenon could be well compared with the addiction. And because it is addictive, and the mass media content with the strong identification mechanisms as well, the TV series have great influence on individuals, society and everyday life.

The first massive broadcast of series in the region of East Europe of non-English speaking origin begun in 1998. It was telenovelas that captivated millions in the postwar period in Balkans. The effect was astounding. The same people, once enemies at the confrontation lines in war, sit down at the same time to watch the same telenovelas. The audience in Serbia gave charity to the church for the recovery of the main character Marisol. The rating of *Muñeca Brava*, the major Argentinean telenovela was higher than the news rating, which never happened in the history of public and state television in Bosnia. The visit of the Mexican actress who played the role of Esmeralda to Sarajevo was euphoric, almost resembling the visits of former Yugoslavian president Tito. Numerous bomb threats were given to the TV station that broadcasted the telenovela *O Clone*, under the pretext of narrative undermining the pillars of Islam. It is evident that politics and history feel endangered by the fictional representation of reality.

The same social awareness emerges from political and clerical circles in regard to the Turkish series. Somehow the need to comment on fictional and artistic work is inherently embedded to those on power in any culture or period in history. Here are some examples: *Kurtlar Vadisi* caused major political dispute between Israel and Turkey. The series depicts Mossad agents in a negative context. This is one of the series with the highest rating in Turkey. The impact of the Turkish series with tragic consequences is evident in the killings of five people in Yemen, inspired by the Turkish series *Kurtlar Vadisi*. Yemeni man has been executed after murdering four men and a woman in an effort to imitate a Turkish soap opera.<sup>4</sup> According to the writings of Emirates.new.com, divorce rates in UAE is increased in percentage of family disputes, for which some experts blame addiction to Turkish series *Gumus* (*Noor* in Arabic).<sup>5</sup> Turkish Prime Minister, Erdogan, condemned publically the production team of *Muhteşem Yüzyil* (The Magnificent Century) show. According to the Todayszaman.com Turkish Prime minister emphasized the following: "his government issued warnings to the series and he hopes that the judicial mechanism will rule appropriately regarding the series. He said there must be a response within the law to those who mock the values of the people".<sup>6</sup> On the other occasion he publicly congratulated the leading actors for the work they've done. The same series was publicly crucified by the radicals in Serbia. Never mind the high prime time rating in the same country. At the end of March 2012, members of the ultra right campaign *Nası* (*Ours*) put up posters all over Belgrade protesting against broadcasting of *Muhteşem Yüzyil* series.<sup>7</sup> The Serb historians assert in public media that the history is forged. There is a similar situation in talk shows and media discussions in Bosnia and Herzegovina where the scholars and historians gather to discuss inaccuracies presented about the life in harem and at the Ottoman palace, and they defend the historic figure of this series character. Serious debates made by serious people, from the serious academic and political fields, emerge around series that in fact are not serious at all. Artists and storytellers see the world through their own eyes, thus making a new world, that doesn't necessarily coincide with the truth. As long as it operates within itself, it works just fine for the work of art of the representation.

---

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Hirshfeld, "Turkish Soap Opera Inspires Murder, Clerics Blame 'West' ", *Israel National News*, 2012, December 7. Available at: <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/157781#.UTPCr6I3uSo> (last consulted 26 August 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Staff, "Turkish soap opera blamed for UAE divorces", *Emirates 24/7 News*, 2012, April 4. Available at: <http://www.emirates247.com/news/emirates/turkish-soap-opera-blamed-for-uae-divorces-2012-04-04-1.452235> (last consulted 26 August 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Anonymous, "Turkey' PM Erdoğan slams TV series about Ottoman sultan", *Today's Zaman*, 2012, November 25. Available at: <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-299316-turkeys-pm-erdogan-slams-tv-series-about-ottoman-sultan.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Nataša Ilić, "Istorijski falsifikat: 'Romantični' Sulejman nabijao srpske glave na kočeve!", *Telegraf*, 2012, March 7. Available at: <http://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/104524-istorijski-falsifikat-romanticni-sulejman-nabijao-srpske-glave-na-koceve>.

Yet, telenovelas might be the incentive to acts in real serious life with devastating consequences. One of the most appalling examples of the TV influence is in the murder of Daniela Perez in 1992. Brazilian newspaper headlines in December of 1992, covering the story of the murder of Daniela Perez revealed the shocking truth about the psychological process of actors' identification. The partner of this young actress brutally murdered her in real life, after staging and shooting a scene in the soap opera *De Corpo e Alma* produced by TV Globo. In the said love scene the character played by Daniela Perez states that she does not love her partner anymore. After the murder in real life, the actor surrendered himself claiming that he confused the reality and the fiction he was playing in. The production company was later announced to be the accomplice in this brutal act.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from some ridiculous social debates, cultural differences and serious identification problems, the Turkish series in the Balkans have replaced the Latino melodrama. The interest in learning Turkish, visiting Turkey and trying the Turkish products has rapidly increased since the first Turkish series *Binbir Gece* (1001 nights) was broadcasted in Croatian TV Nova in 2010. Turkey has become a popular destination for Bosnians, Croatians and Serbians, the popularity to be partly in debt to the series. And this popularity is enormous. Here is one illustration. Here, the touristic offers are named after the character in the series *Magnificent Century* inspired by the historical figure of Sulejman the Magnificent. The article is dedicated to the competition of a private TV station OBN, to which hundreds of applications arrived. The winners whose facial features resembled that of the actors in the said series won the trip to Turkey. The viewers from different culture will learn through the series, along with the language, much about gastronomy and cultural norms that exist during social gathering like weddings, baby deliveries, deaths and everyday communication and how love and hatred can be expressed in a socially acceptable manner.

In countries where the foreign programs are subtitled (Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia are among them) Turkish television series help a lot in the process of language learning and they also offer possibility to notice cultural linguistic differences. The positive effects of Turkish series can be seen in the social and cultural depiction of the following problems: alcoholism, drug abuse, disease treatment, family values, good manners, moral issues, etc. So apart from merely entertaining us, series are also big in edutainment industry, for they can be a great educational tool, because they address social and cultural issues and problems.

Positive and negative impacts won't help us define the genre differences, for soaps, telenovelas and series have enormous influence and popularity. For that we must go deeper into the analysis of genre. Telenovela is the genre emerged from the national union in South America in the 50s. It is this Latino-Iberian genre that peaked in popularity all over the world at the turn of the century. These are the major features that differ soaps from telenovelas:

- telenovela has a limited duration (usually 7 months) while the soap opera is with no limits with regard to duration;
- telenovela is a product developed for the prime-time and the soap opera is not necessarily a prime-time product;
- the basic plot of telenovela show is love;
- telenovela clings firmly to **the structure of melodrama with a happyending**;
- evil, obstacles, intrigue, deceit, infidelity are the obstacles that will ultimately guarantee success for the telenovela protagonists (there is a very **strong religious** and cultural imperative – Kingdom of Heaven is reserved for those who suffer on earth), while in the soap opera these drama tools are invented for plot development with the ultimate goal of entertainment;
- telenovela main characters belong to middle class, nationalism is propagated as well as the differences between the classes where the rich are to be blamed for, but in the soap operas the main issue is an intrigue between the rich;
- telenovela outlines differences and promotes teamwork, while the soap opera tends to unification and globalization, through American-like importance of individualism.<sup>9</sup>

Rick Altman in his book *Film/Genre* designates the “genre as process” and explains that mixed features of classical genres come from rebellion against Classicism. “What we perceive as a mixture of pre-existing genres is often nothing less than the liquid lava of new genre still in the creation process”.<sup>10</sup> The

<sup>8</sup> Telenovelas: (1995), BBC, director: Alexandre Valenti; ARTE in Fine films Imagine Productions.

<sup>9</sup> Panjeta, L., Mazziotti, N., Spahić, B., & Sanchez, L. (2005). *Telenovela – fabrika ljubavi, Uvod u produkciju i žanr (Telenovela – La fábrica del amor, Introducción al género y a la producción)*. Sarajevo Naklada Zoro & HEFT.

<sup>10</sup> Rick Altman, *Film / Genre*, London: British Film Institute, Palgrave Macmillan. p. 143.

postmodernism generally excludes the genre issues. And it is evident in the funny and juxtaposing labels that we give to the works of art and media today: crime drama, supernatural romance, police procedural, detective fiction, SF drama, detective romance, teen vamp, etc. The mixed genres are also the consequence of the capitalism and demand of the market.

In the television in the west we have almost a roller coaster attraction of mixed genres and in the east the return to the classical, well compositional solid narratives. The Turkish series are so often based on the classical works:

- *Yaprak Dökümü* is based on the novel by Reşat Nuri Güntekin written in 1939;
- *Fatmagül'ün suçu ne?* is an adaptation of the Vedat Turkali novel and the film with the same title made in 1986;
- *Kesanlı Ali Destanı* is filmed version of the most famous Turkish music from 1964;
- The scenario for the *Hanımın Çiftliği* is based on the novel *Hanımın Çiftliği* written by Orhana Kemal;
- *Dudaktan Kable* is an adaptation of the famous novel written by Reşat Nuri Güntekin with the same title published in 1923;
- *Ezel* is inspired by the popular novel *The Count of Monte Cristo* written by the French writer Alexandre Dumas;
- *Leyla ile Mecnun* is an adaptation of a famous Arab love story;
- *Şubat* is based on the classical fairy-tale *The Beauty and the Beast*.

It might be true to call the postmodern transgression of the soap opera genre into a new mixed genre of classical drama serials, for which a good example are the Turkish serials. So, what are the key elements for Turkish series not to be called telenovelas? The use of film language is different in the Turkish series than in telenovelas:

- moving camera, often dolly and tracking shots (production generally following the sophisticated and elaborate rules of filmmaking narratives)
- blocking the dialogs in non stationary way and breaking the rules of screen direction
- close-ups are in the function of the action, and not the tension elevation tool
- slow motion, overlapping and other editing filmmaking techniques are following the basic storyline by building the suspense and surprise, are narrative justified
- soundtrack following the action in a movie like manner (movie soundtrack, and not suspense builder)
- *deus ex machina* dramaturgy solutions and evil characters *per se* are not common
- script development of the complexity of characters and acting is more sophisticated
- stories are life based, and dramatic creative solutions real, because the characters are not dualistically antagonized between good and evil, but rather consequences of the character's decisions (tragic flaw) are the spin wheel for the plot.

The crucial feature that separates the Turkish series out of telenovelas is the vitality of their stories and the manner of production. Characters are not set or preset, but evolving, just as in the works of classical literature. Almost Tolstoy characters and Shakespeare plotlines are placed into the context of everyday life, but not in an artificial manner of *deus ex machina* plots. Specifically, in the Turkish series, compared to soap operas or telenovelas, there is an organic component of everyday life and tragedy elements. In the series *Fatmagül'ün suçu ne?*, there is a statement that Fatmagül (a raped girl) has a strong heart to which she answers: "I must have it to survive".

Here the moving force is not an already given character, but she is the character who transforms from gentle girl into a strong woman, but not because it is necessary for the story to develop from it, but because it has to be so in order to continue with life from which the narrative here happens. There is no room for pathos for its own sake, but the action is moved by the rigors of everyday life survival. Within the basic clichés of good and evil narrative, the Turkish series offer us the new-old patterns of classic dramaturgy. One might argue the superiority and elitist qualities of classical works to mass media entertainment is not negotiable. But, as a reminder, Greek tragedies were designed and performed for the amphitheatres packed with 150,000 people.<sup>11</sup>

In Turkish series we do not expect the wedding of the main character or unmasking of the villains as we would in telenovelas melodramatic stories. We are not looking forward to see the demise of the

---

<sup>11</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, *History of European Drama and Theatre* (translated by Jo Riley), London: Routledge, 2002.

characters. Instead, as in a classical tragedy, through the process of catharsis, we feel pity for the complete situation in which not willingly, but as a result of certain own decisions and fate's (*hybris* and Moira) the characters found themselves in. The development of the character in Turkish series resembles that of the Greek tragedy. However, these are not ancient Greek heroes, but everyday life people forced to walk the path of the hero in order to survive in the world that is almost mythically cruel.

Series form and influence major part of its audience everyday life and the artists and creators behind the scene are aware that TV series has become industry and profitable business the benefits of which are to be yet recognized fully and taken by marketing, PR and politics. But the recipients are not to be easily fooled. What brings them to the magic of storytelling can easily be shattered if given the blunt propaganda input. Traveling to other worlds and other peoples' lives and cultures is the allure that performing serial is offering nowadays. The culture is untamable, and like lava is able to set roots in peoples' hearts. Its reflection is found in the storytelling serials created and genre changed upon the demands of the audience.