

## Politics of Representation: Television in a São Paulo *Favela*

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*I think I've read almost half of Agatha Christie's work. I like Sidney Sheldon a lot. I love thrillers and Jô Soares. I did not like Adriane Galisteu's book. I thought it was weak (?). I've read O guarani by José de Alencar. I read magazines and newspapers. My life, the life of the poor, is shit. If you don't look for information, you will never get any better. I just don't read the newspaper when I don't go anywhere I can read it. I read it everyday on the bus. I get on the bus, read it and throw it away.*

Laurinho, Vila Feliz

### Wired Up to the World

The *favela* or shanty town of Vila Feliz is simultaneously segregated by distinct social barriers and wired up to the world through books, newspapers, magazines, television, radio, VCRs and a variety of institutions, such as the Catholic Church, Pentecostals, Neo-Pentecostals, the Mormons, Afro-Brazilian cults, political parties, public and private social organizations and criminal activities.<sup>2</sup> This complex interplay of segregation and connection constitutes daily life in this extraordinary place that can be seen as a microcosm of Brazil. Located in the heart of one of the richest neighborhoods in the city of São Paulo, Vila Feliz synthesizes some of the paradoxes of contemporary Brazilian society. Social inequality is dramatically inscribed into this urban landscape. The mansions of the rich are situated near to wooden huts, unpaved streets and open sewers. Tower blocks of condominiums have balconies on each floor, as well as swimming pools that overlook Vila Feliz. Their sewage comes down the hill through the *favela* in open

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streams, heading for the river. Whereas upper-middle-class streets in São Paulo are characteristically winding, the streets of the *favela* are laid out in a grid pattern. A further irony is that the streets of the *favela* are named after enlightened Anglo-Saxon philosophers, such as Herbert Spencer or Jeremy Bentham.

An ambiguous dynamic of fear, separation and intimacy defines the relations between those who live in Vila Feliz and those who live in the nearby condominiums. Nannies, guards, gardeners, cleaning women, cooks, drivers, sewer workers, bricklayers, office boys and a whole army of condominium employees live in the *favela*. They walk up hill to their work, which is often inside upper-middle-class apartments. There these employees become acquainted with the manners, fashions, architectural styles, cooking habits and frustrations of their employers. Nonetheless, the latter rarely enter the *favela*.

Violence is part of daily life in Vila Feliz. Certain activities are viewed with particular suspicion, such as taking photographs. Photographs are forbidden because they are considered as possible ways of mapping and scrutinizing secret domains. Upper-middle-class homes are heavily protected by gates, video cameras, alarms and private guards, so as to isolate them from the outside world. This complex dynamic of exclusion and inclusion is reflected in the fact that many security guards who are responsible for protecting wealthy homes from the threat represented by the nearby *favela*, are themselves *favelados* of (?)inhabitants of the shanty town.

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Representatives of public institutions such as the police or the municipal government rarely enter Vila Feliz. However, local politics is dominated by informal groups based on kinship, whose roots lie in Brazil's remote North East, where mass migration originated. Social segregation is inscribed in the bodies of the *favelados*, and Vila Feliz has a large black and mulatto population. Gender inequality and discrimination are also a significant dimension of daily life in the *favela*, as a large percentage of the households are headed by women, while unemployment, alcoholism and violence involve mostly men. Family arrangements are unstable and they frequently change.

As in many other communities in Brazil, religion has a prominent place in Vila Feliz. There are various Evangelical churches, a group of American Mormons, a Catholic priest and Afro-Brazilian cults. The informal economy, although hard to quantify, is strong. Vila Feliz's inhabitants, particularly the women, make and sell ice-cream and *raspadinha* (ice), organize weekend tourist excursions, and sell Avon and Natura make-up and beauty products, as well as underwear and house decorations, from door to door. In addition, less common informal activities include video-making and private teaching.

Local commerce is booming. Bars, video rental stores, nightclubs, a post office, beauty parlors, furniture and hardware stores, and shops selling groceries, clothes and electronics, abound. The *favela* comes alive in the afternoons, when early morning workers come back from their day of labor in one of the local skyscrapers, or in a nearby neighborhood. Gossip, romance and sensuality

flourish. In contrast, mornings are slow, and after dark walking around is not recommended.

Consumption plays an important role in the attempt by Vila Feliz's residents to demonstrate that they command enough knowledge and information to overcome social, racial and gender discrimination. The people of Vila Feliz spend money on expensive electronic equipment, and television sets are at the top of their shopping list. In 1997, one week after direct Satellite television was first broadcast in Brazil, one small satellite dish popped up on the roof of a hardware store in Vila Feliz. The high percentage of color television sets (89.8% of households) contrasts with the relatively low percentage of washing machines (38.5% of households). The importance of television is also clear when one looks at the high percentage of households with more than one television set (21.6%).<sup>3</sup> Wooden shacks conceal carefully decorated and well-equipped living rooms.

However, social differences are revealed by leisure habits and by the kind of interaction people have with the media. Despite the high level of consumption and access to information, people in Vila Feliz rarely spend money on leisure pursuits outside the *favela*. Unlike middle-class Brazilians, they seldom go to the movies or to the theater. Few people read the daily newspapers. When they do so, as the quotation that serves as an epigraph to this article suggests, they read them when they are outside the *favela*. At least partially aware of these different leisure habits, young people in Vila Feliz mobilize different media preferences in order to distinguish their individual choices from what they consider to be the average

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preferences of *favelados*. Young men choose public television documentaries and elite magazines as their favorite source of information. They show off their extensive knowledge of pop music, their own poetry, or their enlightened awareness of socio-political discrimination, including what they recognize as their misrepresentation in mainstream media, and television.

In the quest to overcome segregation, interaction with a diverse range of media, from books to radio and television, plays a key role. The importance attached to electronic equipment by the people of Vila Feliz can be understood as part of their wider attempts to display knowledge and information as if to demonstrate that they are ready to be fully incorporated into society. Young people in particular manipulate the dominant system of classification, according to which popular *novelas* or soap operas, often referred to simply as *novelas*, are dismissed as poor illiterate women's programs. Their display of alternative sources of information and expression is consistent with their desire to escape the *favela* and discrimination.

Nevertheless, most people, both in the *favela* and in the upper-middle-class dwellings, demonstrate an extensive knowledge of current and past *novelas*. In the next section of this article I will explore the ways in which *novelas*, although targeted at women, work as a 'shared repertoire' through which men, women and children problematize their troubled and unstable family lives, as the traditional model of family relations is deconstructed, both in the narratives of the soaps themselves and in daily life.

### **Made for women**

With 98.7 million viewers, the Brazilian television audience is among the eight largest in the world. For almost 30 years (1970-1997), between 40% and 60% of this national audience have watched *novelas*, prime-time soaps that run for around 6 months each, every night, but Sunday, six days a week. *Novelas* are written while they are being aired, stimulating an unequal interactive dynamic. Scriptwriters and producers attempt to 'feel' or monitor viewers' understandings of the narrative. In so doing, they dialogue or 'pluralogue' with imagined audiences. Viewers are aware that to some extent scriptwriters and networks take their opinions into account when deciding about the fate of characters. Middle age and middle class women who live in Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo are considered as privileged interlocutors. Nevertheless, female viewers in other cohorts and male viewers also adopt a position with regard to the controversial issues and characters that form part of soap narratives. The latter mobilize shifting representations of the what viewers see as the ideal in terms of men, women, family and the nation as a whole.

From 1968 onwards, the year in which the Tupi network's *Beto Rockfeller* (Brazil, 11/04/1968 to 11/30/1969) was aired, and throughout the early 1970s, the Globo network defined a set of conventions that formed a narrative mode that was adhered to until the late 1980s. This set of conventions retained the basic melodramatic structure (Xavier, 1997; Joyrich, 1991): narratives moved by gender, generation, class, rural and urban, and moral oppositions that were seen in terms of 'modern' versus 'traditional'. However, the new model emphasized immediacy

and actuality rather than fantasy and remoteness. Linking the romantic plots with realistic representations of the daily life of the viewer became the main issue in the creation of *novelas*. In order to make this connection they combined the formal narrative conventions of television melodrama with those of news and documentary.

As alternatives to the ‘fantasy’-oriented series made in Cuba, Mexico or Argentina, but like them, cheap series produced for women, *novelas* came to the forefront of the Brazilian television industry, dominating prime time. Staged in contemporary times, shot in the studios, but including external sequences shot on location, incorporating contemporary slang and fashion, making reference to social and political events and to real places, *novelas* retained the original melodramatic narrative structure, but situated the stories in contemporary times and in well defined spaces. The ways in which, in the new model, the diegesis is sometimes disrupted, with references to extra-diegetic elements, are of particular interest here, as in so doing *novelas* borrow from the documentary tradition and modern cinema, in order to create a sense of immediacy, and of “reality” that grounds their verisimilitude.

In 1969 *Véu de noiva/Bride’s veil* (Globo, Brazil, 11/10/1969 to 06/27/1970) made reference to the Formula 1 international motor racing championship that Brazil had just won for the first time. The following year, *Irmãos Coragem/Courage Brothers* (Globo, Brazil, 06/29/1970 to 07/15/1971) was released right after Brazil won the soccer world cup for the third time, an event that prompted one of the

most powerful displays of nationalism in Brazilian history. The first episode of this soap started with a sports documentary-like sequence of a match between the Flamengo and Fluminense teams in the Maracanã stadium in Rio de Janeiro. Over the years, references to the nation have become more explicit, with the national colors and songs used in credit sequences, framing the story lines of *novelas* as national dramas.

The visual economy of *novelas* is mainly based on classical shot and reverse shot, fast-pace editing, costumes, hairstyles and music, all of which act as 'external' devices that help to define characters. Melodramatic conflicts of moral values such as loyalty and disloyalty, love and hate, and good and evil, underpin the narratives. Moral opposition intersects with demographic categories to move plots. Conflicts between male and female characters (occasionally recent series discuss gay relations), between parents and their off springs, and class opposition between characters who own – land or industry – depending on the particular story – are framed in moral terms. Race is present by its absence. Racial discrimination is seldom dealt with in the narratives, and the majority of the cast of *novelas* are invariably white.

*Novelas* also make reference to well-known figures from Brazilian politics and popular and elite literature, such as the *coronel* - local patriarchs, who rule private and public lives in rural Brazil and who are paradigmatic figures in literature, film, politics and social sciences, especially in the 60s. The clash between practices, objects and values framed as 'traditional' or 'modern'



encompasses moral and demographic oppositions.

Although *novelas* continue to be the most popular programs on Brazilian television, attracting impressive numbers of viewers, ratings have declined during the 1990s. Fieldwork has suggested that viewers are not as loyal to *novelas* as was expected. Moreover, although viewers enjoy the current 8 p.m. Globo *novela*, its popularity is linked to the longstanding habit of *novela* watching at this time of day. Viewers have tended to follow any 8 p.m. soap shown on the Globo network, since this highly codified program is situated within well defined textual and viewer conventions. Between June 1996 and February 1997 the 8 p.m. Globo soap happened to be (*O Rei do Gado / The Cattle King* (Globo, Brazil dates above)).

There is widespread interest in soap operas that corroborates the television ratings and can also be interpreted as a metaphor for social status. Men watch less than women, and middle-class women watch less than their working-class counterparts. Teenage girls and a large number of women over the age of 40 constitute the most loyal viewers in both the social groups that were studied as part of the fieldwork for this article. The Mexican *novela* *Marimar*, broadcast in an earlier time slot by the rival SBT network, generated great excitement among *favela* viewers.

Although everybody follows *novelas*, watching these popular series is not considered a prestigious activity. Therefore, although, as previously noted, most people are familiar with the characters, plot and conventions, viewers often identify other viewers, rather than themselves, as big fans of the soaps. Viewers'

perceptions about who constitutes the main audience for *novelas* confirm the ratings and the television industry's own conclusions. Men say that women watch them. Middle-class, middle-aged women say that older and/or younger female relatives, as well as maids, constitute the main audience. When viewers voice their concerns about the possible negative impact of what they define as 'immoral' and 'racy' stories, they frequently identify women, teenagers, and particularly children, as potential 'victims'.

Indeed, as predicted by producers and audience researchers, teenage girls, older middle-class women and working-class women constituted the core viewers of *The Cattle King*. Nonetheless, other viewers' working knowledge of the series highlighted the ways in which *novelas* mediate social relations, acting as a shared repertoire through which viewers enact daily conflicts. Male interpretations about what both the industry and the viewers classify as a 'female program' offer enlightening insights into how this *novela* related to the personal life stories of the audience members, and into how it was appropriated and incorporated into the intersection between their ongoing family conflicts and current public issues. The notion that *novelas* pertain to the female domain does not mean that men are not familiar with their conventions.

Men also watch

Although men were less knowledgeable about the characters in *The Cattle King* than women, they knew the plot inside out, and understood the genre's conventions. They also proved to remember more clearly previous *novelas*. When describing his past relationship with these television series, a middle-class medical

doctor perhaps most effectively revealed the connection between *novelas* and a desire to broaden social and moral horizons. This man described himself as a loyal *telenovela* viewer when he first came to São Paulo to attend medical school from a rural town in the state of Paraná. He even admitted that at that time he did not care about television news. When talking about the past, he described *novelas* as compulsive viewing his daily routine:

I remember when I was a medical student, my God, I could not miss an episode of a *telenovela*! At 7 p.m. if I did not sit in front of the TV set, that was not a good day. It would turn out to be a bad day. I was actually addicted. I sat there from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m. During the *Jornal Nacional* newscast I did something else. At 8:30 p.m., I sat there again until 9 p.m. And that was my routine every day. (Milu and Nando, p.1.)

This viewer went on to recollect the ways in which, in his experience, *novelas* are associated with what he calls ‘liberation’ and ‘transformation’:

Of all these *novelas*, the one that made the greatest impact on me was *Beto Rockefeller*. This *novela* changed a lot of things within us. It portrayed many things that we wanted to do. At that time, there was not a huge amount of freedom (...) Therefore we watched that and his [the protagonist of the series] *liberation*. That was cool. We had never seen anything like that before. And after that one, I hardly saw other (a) *transformation* like that one. of anything in other *novelas*. (Milú and Nando, p.2, author’s emphasis)

This is perhaps the most expressive account of the ways in which *novelas* are perceived as being attuned to young viewers’ desires to widen their experiences. This viewer was talking about his experiences as a boy from the countryside who came to the city to go to college. When *Beto Rockefeller* was first shown in 1968 he was eighteen years old. This *telenovela* depicted the encounter between a young outsider and glamorous, ‘liberated’, contemporary urban society. Aired by the pioneering Tupi network, directed by Lima Duarte, and produced by Cassiano Gabus Mendes, *Beto Rockefeller* was the first Brazilian *telenovela* to use colloquial,

everyday language and contemporary settings (Ortiz et al., 1989). At a time when many *novelas* were being adapted from Mexican, Cuban or Argentinean scripts, *Beto Rockefeller* legitimated itself as a ‘high brow’ soap because it was written by a Brazilian writer and was inspired by a Brazilian modernist novel. It brought innovations of form to the genre. Bráulio Pedroso, the writer, was known for his ‘high culture’ theater pieces. Like Macunaíma, the native Brazilian protagonist of the eponymous classic modernist novel by Mário de Andrade [1928] (1984), Beto, the protagonist of the *telenovela*, was ‘a hero without a character’. *Beto Rockefeller* tells the story of a young lower-middle-class salesman who pretends he is a millionaire in order to penetrate the realm of high society. Beto feels torn between the love of his poor girlfriend, and the love of a wealthy woman. As a boy from a working-class neighborhood, Beto is an outsider, a kind of hick, who becomes involved with a group of young people who dress, talk, and behave in a modern way, by, for example, driving cars and smoking.

‘Transformation’ and ‘liberation’, words the medical doctor used to describe his early experience of the *telenovela* still constitute the key notions of both male and female viewership. Viewers associate these notions with moving up the social ladder, and learning how to behave in sophisticated contemporary urban settings. They make the association between these concepts and the shift from being a victim of the cruel discrimination of powerful villains to reaching a position of power over one’s enemies. At the beginning of a series, characters are outsiders, who do not know how to deal with complex systems of silverware, who do not dress appropriately or do not master restricted repertoires such as literature, travel

or foreign languages. They then go through a process of ‘transformation’. Their transformed selves find expression in ‘external’ signs which are typical of the melodrama, such as clothing and hairstyle (Joyrich, 1992). However, *novelas* do not always adhere to this formula in the ways that viewers expect. When characters do not fully perform the paradigmatic trajectory, as was the case with the protagonists of *The Cattle King*, viewers criticize them for not evolving in the direction that they want them to.

Perhaps the shift in the viewers’ involvement with *novelas* is also related to changes in the content of *novelas* themselves. Early *novelas*, such as *Irmãos Coragem/ Courage Brothers* (Globo, Brazil, 06/29/1970-07/15/1971) or *Selva de pedra/ Jungle of stone* (Globo, Brazil, (12/04/1972 to 23/01/1973) conveyed an optimistic vision of happy families who lived in a ‘country of the future’. However, in the late 1980s, with titles such as *Roque Santeiro/ Roque the Saintmaker* (Globo, Brazil, 06/24/1985 to 02/21/1986) or *Vale Tudo /Everything Goes* (Globo, Brazil, 05/16/1988 to 01/07/1989) the genre captured and articulated the unanticipated consequences of modernization. *Novelas* depict with irony, and sometimes with cynicism, contemporary Brazil as constituted by a complex but perverse interplay between enduring ‘archaic’ forms of sociability and advanced technologies. This shift in the way that *novelas* represent nationhood epitomizes the fragmented nature of the nation early 21<sup>st</sup>-century Brazil (Hamburger 1998 and 1999). Following a break with these previous conventions in the form of the series *Pantanal* (Manchete, Brazil, 03/27/1990 to 12/10/1990), *The Cattle King* avoided

the opposition between the traditional and the modern. But viewers reacted against what they interpreted as undesirable gender and family models.

Although men watch *novelas*, they feel awkward talking about them because they place these soaps in the female domain, but also because, at least in some cases, they feel their authority threatened by recent examples. The informal leader of Vila Feliz hesitated before admitting that he watched *novelas*. But once he did so, he revealed extensive knowledge about previous series. For him, from the early 1990s, with the airing of *Tiêta*, one of the few Jorge Amado adaptations aired in the 8 p.m. slot, (Globo, 08/14/1989 to 03/31/1990) *novelas* started to portray what he describes as ‘too much scandal’, which, according to him, means too much sex. Furthermore, although he acknowledges a woman’s right for independence, this local patriarch’s view of ideal gender relations conflicts with what he actually sees in *novelas*:

In the *novela*, women always want to be better, superior to men. *Novelas* set bad examples for couples because they are too liberal. I do not mean that women have to be humiliated by men. Women have a right to work. Like my wife, [she] has always worked. I have never forbidden her from going out, never. But she has always respected me in the right way, because I am the man, and she is the woman. Because if my wife wants to be my equal, we cannot live together. We have to get along, but always knowing that the head of the household is the man. (Tenório, p.46.)

Some male viewers are familiar with the basic narrative of the 8 p.m. Globo *novelas*, but they prefer other programs. The current diversification of television viewership manifests itself in a preference for ‘reality shows’ (Chambat and Ehrenberg, 1993). Even before the advent of reality game shows such as *Big Brother Brasil* (Globo, Brazil, 2002), or the similar *Casa dos Artistas/ Artists House* (SBT, Brazil, 2001-), television newscasts that focused on crime introduced

working-class ‘real life’ on television. Like *Pantanal* did for fiction, the newscast *Aqui, Agora/ Here and Now* (SBT, Brazil, early 1990s) made its mark on Brazilian television. Roving cameras that followed reporters up the hills in popular neighborhoods, lengthy improvised live shots, with little editing conveyed a sense of reality that was coherent with the subjects that the show brought to the screen, namely private conflicts such as family violence, rape and robbery, that took place in popular and previously invisible neighborhoods. Although *Aqui, agora / Here and Now* is no longer aired, its format served as the inspiration for other programs that attracted the same male viewers, such as *Na Rota do Crime/In the Route of Crime* (Manchete, Brazil, 1996-1997), *Cidade Alerta/Alert City* (Record, Brazil, 1996-) and *190 Urgente!/190 Urgent!* (CNT/Gazeta, Brazil, 1996-7). Dissatisfied with what they classify as the ‘unrealistic narratives’ of *novelas*, viewers say that they prefer ‘real life’ on television. After all, so their argument goes, these programs are not fiction, and they deal with cases of violence that are similar to the ones that actually occur in their daily lives. Live reporting in the urban settings of *favelas* and poor neighborhoods conveys a sense of connection that *novelas* are unable to achieve.

### **Novelas as national ‘shared repertoires’**

*Novelas* provide a metaphorical idiom through which male and female viewers, both in the *favela* and in middle-class condominiums, enact their private family dramas in collective and public terms. Because it focused on female infidelity and violence against women, *The Cattle King* directly engaged with the topic of the

instability of family life in Brazil. When men and women watched and commented on it, they expressed their assessment of their own position in this unstable private world. Indeed the viewers I interacted with moved back and forth very easily between the story on television and their own life stories. In so doing, they articulated their ideal gender roles and family structures in relation to and through the mediation of television.

This *telenovela* thus constituted a 'shared repertoire' through which both men and women could theorize about their nation, not necessarily in the terms set by the explicit content of the text, but in terms of legitimate ideal types of women and men, and marital and paternal relationships. Some viewers even explicitly articulated their interpretation of *The Cattle King* as a *telenovela* that somehow operated on different levels and dealt with issues that were crucial to the family as the foundation of the nation. Moreover, through their conversations about this *telenovela*, both male and female viewers enacted their most private experiences and conflicts in public terms.

When viewers commented on the *telenovela* to their friends, family members or co-workers, they mobilized a whole repertoire of previous *telenovela* conventions that they had appropriated and interpreted in specific ways. When they defined their attitudes towards *The Cattle King*, they positioned their own personal stories and contexts within this publicly-acknowledged body of theories and notions. For example, a couple that fought frequently escaped the general critic of the character who battered his lover in the *novela*. For this couple



violence in the story expressed love. While attributing value to the characters, they justified their own private drama.

As a 'shared repertoire', *novelas* constitute the means through which viewers can mobilize some of their multiple social identities, as citizens, as consumers, as men or women, as belonging to a certain gender, social class or generation. Different issues, events and characters in the *telenovela* position viewers in different ways. Issues that opposed old-fashioned, traditional values and contemporary family and gender questions in *The Cattle King* seemed, to mobilize identities that bridge generation, gender and class divides. The male protagonist's understanding attitude towards his unfaithful ex-wife raised questions about his masculinity. While middle aged female viewers tended to support and identify with this character, who, in their view, enacted up-to-date, 'modern' ways of relating to women, older women condemn the female character, and male viewers felt that the male protagonist violated their models of gender relations. In other words, male and female viewers appropriate the narrative in their private life, disputing conflicting representations in relation to specific characters. Often these positions have a direct connection with their own personal relationships.

## **Conclusions**

Since the publication of one of the first academic work on telenovela, by Micelli (1972), the Brazilian literature on the subject has been concerned with viewership. Insightful ethnographic accounts bring information about the locations of television sets, the timing of television watching, and the different ways that

television and particularly *novelas* are appropriated in everyday life, depending on factors such as social class and geographical region (Leal, 1986; Prado, 1987). In this article, I have explored the other side of the coin. I have looked at the meanings and appropriations of *novelas* that viewers of different genders and social classes *share*. Building on my previous research (Hamburger 1999), and in line with the work of others such as Buarque de Almeida (1998 and 2001) and La Pastina (1999), I have looked at the ways that *novelas* mediate conflict in situations of social and gender discrimination, for men and women, in the *favela*, and in the upper-middle-class areas.

This 'shared repertoire' loses its force as space for opposition discourses and alternative appropriations of the media emerges. In their attempt to demonstrate their knowledge of repertoires that extrapolate their social situation, viewers in the *favela* mention an eclectic range of media material, including written material. For example, to go back once more to the quotation that opens this article, before revealing that he masters the narrative of the *telenovela*, the viewer in question refers to an eclectic list of books that he has read, as well as his habit of reading the newspaper. He offers these details as evidence of his detachment from the realm of ignorance, illiteracy and poverty that he associates with the *favela*.

Parallel to this search for broader sources of information, in the early 2000s perhaps for the first time in poor neighborhoods, music and literary movements such as hip hop and marginal literature echo grassroots initiatives of video making,

community radio, or library organization, suggesting that new forces have appeared in the making of the politics of representation.

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**Endnotes**

1. I began my fieldwork in *Vila Feliz*, (fiction name, that nonetheless keeps the irony implied in the original name) São Paulo *favela*, as part of the 'Social Impact of Television in Brazil' project, conducted jointly by CEBRAP, CEDEPLAR – Federal University of Minas Gerais, ECA – University of São Paulo, NEPO – University of Campinas, PRC and RTF – University of Texas, Austin. The project was funded by the MacArthur, Rockefeller and Hewlett Packard Foundations. Fieldwork between 1996 and 1997 was conducted with the help of Ronaldo de Almeida. The first draft of this paper was written with a post-doctoral grant from the Mellon Foundation during a stay at the Population Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, and was presented at the International Communication Association meeting in San Francisco. Proper names are fiction.

2. In 1997, when CEDEPLAR conducted a survey, only 10.2% of the households did not have a color TV set. Many of these households were probably equipped with black and white sets.