STORYTELLING DEVIATIONS AND ATTENTION DISPUTES IN BRAZILIAN NETFLIX ORIGINALS

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we seek to highlight and discuss some changes observed in Brazilian Netflix series since 2016 that play an important role in the complexity of the productions. Those changes are expansions in the classical narrative and plot model, with consequent changes in the strategies of information distribution, the effect on how viewer attention is gained and the thematic development of the productions. Regarding the methodology, we adopted a poetic reading based on David Bordwell's considerations on the classical storytelling model. We concluded that the expansions contributed to a greater demand for viewer attention, in addition to encouraging a diversity of points of view and greater complexity of the theme.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article aims to show the partial results obtained by exploring about a quarter of all Netflix releases made in Brazil between 2016 and 2020. This production universe belongs to the corpus of the research project "Latin America Label for the export of televisual fiction: market, communication, and experience in the streaming era" (*Selo América Latina*) developed in partnership between universities in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico. Based on recent studies on new media (Jenner 2018; Picado 2019; Rocha *et al* 2021a, 2021b; Silva 2014, 2015) and the impact of streaming services (Meimaridis *et al* 2020, 2021; Lotz 2020, Cornélio-Marí 2020; Orozco 2020), this research project aims to analyze changes in marketing strategies and innovations in creation, writing, and plot and style design of Latin American television serial fictions in the post-Netflix scenario.

Based on a culture of television production marked by large communication conglomerates (Rede Globo in Brazil, Televisa in Mexico, and Caracol TV in Colombia) and by works built following melodrama conventions and rules, our challenge is to think the extent to which Netflix's demand for local series could be an independent variable focusing on these new market dynamics and construction modes. The characteristics of television culture are more evident in the telenovela genre, the main cultural product of these countries, whose tradition spans more than seven decades (Martín-Barbero, Muñoz 1992; Maziotti 1996, 2006; Lopes 2009; Lopes *et al* 2002; 2002 Alencar; Ortiz *et al* 1989; Barros 2003; Campadelli 1985; Fadul 1993).

Table 1 shows the Brazilian corpus of the Selo América Latina research project. This article analyzes the deviations and innovations of the series *3%* (2016-2020), *Girls From Ipanema* (2019-2020), and *Kissing Game* (2020) via a poetic reading based on David Bordwell's (1985) assertion that the classical model of narration is the main underlying structure of a work.

The analysis allowed us to identify three possible deviations on storytelling norms that render the narrative of this series more complex: anticipation, extent and disruption of the inciting incident, the displacement of the main line of action and multiple protagonism.

We conclude that the analysis in a more properly poetic reading of the materials contributes to a better understanding of aspects of complex seriality, in addition to the already explored blend between episodic arc and season arc. It demonstrates the demand for an intense attention task on the part of viewers as well as the plurality of perspectives on the same theme.

#	Year	Title
1	2016	**3%**
2	2018	The Mechanism (Original Title: O Mecanismo)
3		Samantha!
4		**Girls From Ipanema (Coisa Mais Linda)**
5		The Chosen One (O Escolhido)
6	2019	Sintonia
7		Brotherhood (Irmandade)
8		Nobody's Looking (Ninguém Tá Olhando)
9		Omniscient (Onisciente)
10		Spectros
11	2020	Reality Z
12		**Kissing Game (Boca a Boca)**
13		Good Morning, Verônica (Bom Dia, Verônica)

TABLE 1. BRAZILIAN PRODUCTIONS ORDERED BY NETFLIX (2016-2020)

2. FIRST DEVIATION: DISTURBANCE AS PRESENTATION

Analyzing models of dramatic storytelling dominant in classic Hollywood narrative cinema, Bordwell (1985) presents the elements that compose such a structure in the following terms: i) presentation of intrigue, where the necessary exposition of the story takes place, its location in a certain time and space, its main characters, motivations and conflicts; ii) confrontation, the moment in which an event causes a disturbance and shakes the character's course - which is called by Robert Mckee (1997) as inciting incident; iii) conclusion, when there is a glimpse of a possible resolution to the disturbances and obstacles faced.

Such a structure is also discussed by Lawrence Kincaid (2002: 141-2), for whom, according to classical norms, a narrative begins in the "scene setting", a moment when the variables of the story are duly introduced – including the conflicts to be resolved later. After the opening exposition, there is a "build-up," when the plot develops by accumulation which reinforces the growing tensions. Both scene setting and build-up are considered "convergent" steps, when a certain balance

still prevails. An important part of build-up is the inciting incident because it represents the moment of imbalance, disorientation, helplessness and disarray, in which the characters are confronted with the main obstacles in their path and are led to react and leave the comfort zone, to leave the ordinary world and enter the special world (Campbell and Sobral 2004; McKee 1997).

This structure is still the foundation of contemporary serial narratives and how they balance, in different ways, the flow and the organization of information in the story. And also the way viewers receive them, moment by moment, depending on the narrative genre chosen to tell it.

However, we argue that in the cases observed so far, in contrast to the classic model, there was anticipation of the inciting incident, whose main effect is to speed up the pace and demand alternation of the narrative resources used in the process of understanding the narrative. The conflict disruption is anticipated to the first scenes, thus indicating to the viewer there's something impacting and unbalancing protagonists' and, later, other characters' universes in the very beginning of the series.

We turn to Meir Sternberg (1992: 531-2) to think of how these disruptions gain density and intensity as the narrative information appears on screen. He identifies and explains this relation from a game of three cognitive emotions, a triad of rival hypotheses: surprise, curiosity, and suspense. Surprise can occur subtly or suddenly, be a scene, a sequence or relate to the whole story in which new data realigns viewers' understanding of it. Curiosity sends us to the past to show us information previously omitted, forcing us to hypothesize on the informational fragments the plot had shown us. Suspense is the "opacity of the future," a fear affecting the viewer by involving them with characters' plots. As they naturally try to predict the steps ahead, suspense relies on their conjectures of the least damaging step for the heroines and heroes.

2.1 *3%*

3% (2016-2020) tells the history of the struggle for survival in an extremely divided, post-apocalyptic society. The Process is a competition that includes participants in their twenties in which only the top 3% earn the right to live in Maralto: a safe, abundant region full of opportunities; losers must return to the miserable, barren area from which they came.

The inciting incident occurs in the opening sequence when young people march towards the building where the Process will take place. The sequence begins with the young orphan Michele having breakfast by herself at home when her friend Bruna calls her to the testing grounds whose gates have just opened. Heading the same way, many other poor young people say goodbye to their families. The viewer can see that the neighborhood walls have graffiti written: "The Cause - all deserve it." They access the building and change clothes before the selection, gathering in the main lobby for the welcoming ceremony.

This incident assumes such a magnitude that it permeates the cooperation between narration and reception activities. At first, the inciting incident arouses the viewer's curiosity since, to grasp the narrative, they need to understand the Process, how participants get there, what happened in previous selections, gather clues, and hypothesize about what "The Cause" is. Similarly, this incident arouses suspense by inserting the protagonists into an unknown and unbalanced universe since the narrative gradually reveals what the Process is, and the types of tests candidates undertake. The viewer must maintain a certain attentional effort to grasp what governs decisions, how and who is approved for subsequent stages, and how these elements form a distressing, dramatic, and undefined universe.

The 3% incident carries in itself both curiosity and suspense, requiring the viewer to hypothesize quickly and attentively, so as not to lose the guiding narrative thread.

2.2 *Girls From Ipanema*

Girls From Ipanema (2019-2020) tells the life of four women and their personal, social, and political conflicts against a conservative and patriarchal society. The story is set in Rio de Janeiro in the late 1950s and shows the cultural context of Bossa Nova.

The initial sequence features an airplane flyover followed by scenes of people on the beach. The viewer is located in the narrative space-time by characters reading "Rio de Janeiro, 1959". Soon, we see Malu disembarking at an airport helped by a luggage carrier. Sitting in the lobby, feet shaking, she waits for someone, looks at the clock twice until deciding to proceed on her own to the address she has with her. At that spot, a new setback: she has not found her husband and the place is abandoned, clashing with what she hoped to find when she arrived.

The inciting incident promotes curiosity as the viewer hypothesizes about the reasons for Malu's abandonment. Pedro's unknown location and his absence from the agreed meeting place provokes suspense on how Malu's life will un-

fold. What will be her next steps? Will she look for her husband? Will she return home? Will Pedro appear at any time? It is from this abandonment that Malu begins to make decisions for herself, befriending the other protagonists. Thus, the incident affects the lives of all the characters who engage in the conflicts she faces after her radical move to Rio de Janeiro.

2.3 *Kissing Game*

Friends Fran and Bel dance at night to the sound of a strong electronic beat. The opening scene shows slow motion scenes, quick cuts, and vibrant lights. Other young people are also having fun and the *mise-en-scène* highlights the ecstasy they experience, as in a suspension of reality. Next, a cut to the following morning shows Fran catching Bel cornered and frightened in the bathroom with strange purple spots scattered around her mouth.

In *Kissing Game*, the first piece of information unbalances a universe that has not even been presented to the viewer. Thus, although the viewer is able to know that something strange is happening, they are not given enough knowledge to let them know what or why it is happening.

The anticipation of the incident does not bring details of what happened at the party, stirring curiosity in the form of an investigative narrative (Sternberg 1992). The disruptive opening sequence also generates suspense because, in order to effectively understand the story, the observer is required to follow the developments and consequences of Bel's disease from the first. In this sense, suspense becomes the prevailing tone, and viewers are urged to think about the next moment.

The incident also provoked an expectation that, as the story unfolded, was reversed, causing surprise. The images of the rave followed by the appearance of the stain on Bel's mouth raised the suspicion that the contagion of the disease was related to a type of libertine behavior, typical of irresponsible young people. Only in the last episode the climax of the story reveals that the disease can affect anyone, as its cause is related to experiments with genetically modified animals.

3. SECOND DEVIATION: THE CHANGE OF THE LINE OF ARGUMENT

In his analysis of a set of "classical" films, Bordwell identified a series of narrative and stylistic marks that categorized

them. From these common traits, Bordwell (1985) proposed that

> Usually the classical syuzhet presents a double causal structure, two plot lines: one involving heterosexual romance (boy/girl, husband/wife), the other line involving another sphere - work, war, a mission or quest, other personal relationships. Each line will possess a goal, obstacles, and a climax (1985:157).

The theme in this classical model emerges from the centrality of the first line of action focused on the performance of a protagonist (or a couple) whose love resolves all plot conflicts.

As in the anticipation of the inciting incident, we observe that the first line of action in contemporary production has yielded space to the second plot line, as in the Netflix original pieces considered. This would be a second deviation of the classical model.

3.1 *3%*

The main line of action in *3%* is characters' desire to live in abundant Maralto whose access depends on passing all stages of the Process. The series shares the narrative information across the stories of Michele, Fernando, Rafael, Joana, and Marco, all supposedly 20-year-olds who underwent Process 104. Conducted by Ezequiel, the tests organize the narrative structure throughout the first season episodes and reveal tensions between protagonists, their necessary combinations, arrangements, alliances, disputes, and candidates' physical and psychological limits.

We can better understand the clash of attributes and the instability and tension it generates by exploring sequences of the fourth episode, "Gate," in which Joana and Marco's constructs lead to tension as both begin to occupy antagonistic poles during one of the tests, thus providing important evidence on the central argument of the series.

Joana is a very smart and intelligent African-American young woman, though lonely, suspicious, withdrawn, uncommunicative, and mildly apathetic. She has no family, does not know her origins, and always had to fight to maintain her dignity and preserve the little she conquered. Moreover, she was neither cared for nor received the registration implant necessary for the Process. She often acts without caring about others, finding it difficult to build affective bonds with other candidates and work as a team.

Her attributes contrast to Marco Álvares' throughout the series. The only protagonist to use his surname as a characteristic trait, he is a white, polite, secure, sociable, balanced, concentrated, and objective young man who often puts himself as a leader to (supposedly) help the group during the Process. The team working on the tests chooses Marco as their favorite, associating his behavior with his family: all Álvares were among the 3%. This history is often remembered and offered as something which makes him worthy of approval to the "other side," regardless of his performance.

During a violent dispute over leadership and food, Joana climbs the pipe through which they receive supplies. She comes up against Ezequiel, the leader of the Process, who explains the test to her, saying he cannot interrupt it. He says that a competitor must do something, suggesting that Joana positions herself once and for all as an opposing agent to Marco.

3.2 *Girls From Ipanema*

Girls From Ipanema focuses on the difficulties Malu, Adélia, Lígia and Thereza face in confronting patriarchy and prejudice, and their struggle for independence. This conflict realizes itself by obstacles to their desires, whether they be legal impediments, prejudices or violence. This main line of action empties romantic pairs, lateral to protagonists' trajectories and objectives. Plot progression makes it clear that protagonists' motivations are professional achievements and the search for autonomy.

Malu's involvement with singer Chico seems to be casual, sporadic, and always lateral to her narrative trajectory and objectives. Thus, the focus of her story is first on overcoming the trauma of her husband's abandonment and then, opening a music club. Likewise, Adélia, a black woman, faces racism, poverty, the daily life of the favela, and even her friends' condescending gaze when she decides to leave and become a business owner. Her relationship with Capitão is always in the background. To live a happy marriage, Lígia subjects herself to her husband's oppressions, which include physical aggression. Still, throughout the first season, the series shows her efforts to fulfill her dream of becoming a singer. Since Thereza lives in an open marriage, her main dilemmas and obstacles are professional. A journalist, she faces the male domination at a women's magazine editorial office, and incessantly struggles to hire more female reporters and writes about women's topics beyond cooking and home care.

Thus, romantic pairs are emptied. Chico is far from being a good guy. An alcoholic, despite supporting the opening of the club and the changes in Malu, he neither contributes to her achieving her goals nor helps in her societal conflicts. On the contrary, on the opening of the club, he almost jeopardizes everything by appearing completely drunk and unable to perform. Nelson is also absent from the clashes Thereza faces in her work. He is an unimportant character whose role is only more relevant when his romance with Adélia (and the ensuing love triangle) complicates matters further. Capitão serves no other function but service Adélia's dramas and dilemmas. Lígia's murder prevents her romance with George, an American musician, to even materialize.

3.3 *Kissing Game*

Kissing Game presents as the main line of arguing the quest of three teenagers to discover what caused the death of one of their friends, which would also endanger them later. To develop the central line of action, the narrative is guided by the evolution and interweaving of their individual arcs, providing viewers with an intimate contact with the development of their journeys. Through their paths, we get to know the universe of the story, tensions and conflicts that support the plot, and we come to the solution of the mystery that surrounds them.

Impressed by an image of Bel sick in the hospital, Chico, Fran and Alex come together to discover the origins of the disease, whose only clue is that it is transmitted by kissing. Worried about the "kiss fest" the night before, the friends realize the potential extent of the problem and decide to draw a kiss map to establish the important connections. Alex leads the organization of a map, raises nodal points and inserts photos of each new member of the kiss connections. Fran presents complete and assertive answers about the relationships between each teenager, the steady couples and the ones in crisis and who kissed who, allowing the map to grow. The way in which the girl speaks reveals her mastery over the group of characters in the narrative and the network of connections that end up making so many teenagers cross each other. The vast knowledge about 'who kisses who' brings yet another considerable layer on this protagonist: by talking about the relationships of others with a wealth of details, Fran diverts the focus away from herself, keeping herself reserved regarding her own affective connections (her interest in Bel) and her sexuality.

Meanwhile, Chico is the one who proves to know the least about his classmates, making brief comments on the statements made by Fran or suggesting new characters to join the

map, without even knowing their names. Alex's questions in the quest to map the virus are stuck between Fran's certainties and Chico's vague remarks.

Meanwhile, Chico is the one who proves to know the least about his classmates, making brief comments on the statements made by Fran or suggesting new characters to join the map, without even knowing their names. Alex, in turn, limits himself to building the map on his computer and denies his participation in the "kiss fest."

Throughout the assembly of the map, the sexuality of the protagonists is put approached from different perspectives: Fran shows affection for the images of Bel on the screen; Alex signals that he has never kissed; and Chico talks about his involvement with another boy the previous night. Thus, even though each character has its own conflicts, the main plot revolves around unraveling the mystery about the disease.

4. THIRD DEVIATION: MULTIPLE PROTAGONISM

The third deviation relates to the classical model by its unusual priorities, a kind of diluted protagonism in which characters not only have dense and complex individual arcs but also solve their dramatic turns in different ways. James Phelan (1989) points to three constitutive dimensions of character construction: the mimetic personifies and imitates the action; the synthetic constitutes characters by their traits and aspects; the thematic results from the functionalization of the two as the plot progresses, i.e., each character has a set of traits which may or may not change along the way, generating conflicts and tensions pushing the story forward and affecting its mimetic and thematic levels.

However, in this multiple exercise of protagonists, not all aspects forming personalities promote the narrative. If, on the one hand, it progresses by gradually intertwining each protagonists' plots and aspects; on the other, their traces and dimensions show the denser layers of their personalities which may not contribute to resolving the central narrative conflict (Capello 2016, Rocha *et al* 2021a).

Adopting this multiple protagonism leads us to one of the designs for plot construction structures proposed by Robert Mckee (1997) in his "triangle of formal possibilities". Speaking of Multiplots, Mckee points to the development of another type of distribution of the protagonist function and adds that:

if the writer splinters the film into a number of relatively small, subplot-sized stories, each with a separate protagonist, the result minimalizes the roller-coaster dynamic of the Archplot and creates the Multiplot variation of Miniplot that's grown in popularity since the 1980s (Mckee 1997: 49).

That is, Multiplot would be somewhere between Archplot and Miniplot since characters face internal conflicts, their trajectories clearly and visibly change, and the intertwined aspects of these trajectories ensure the causal and temporal progression of the story. We argue that Multiplot design potentially makes room for various protagonists to balance and develop different points of view on the conflicts comprising the theme of a work.

4.1 *3%*

In *3%*, central and secondary protagonists alternate their prominence throughout episodes and Miniplots. One of the instabilities the narrative structured is the tension between what seems to depend on a purely individual effort to achieve a goal and the opportunities effectively conferred to individuals. This tension evokes answers constituting the thematic dimension: the narrative progressively points towards what the information viewers receive. And in general, this information relates directly to the characters.

From the clash of individual dimensions emerge issues such as the fallacy of meritocracy and a criticism of capitalism, such as social inequalities, the difficulty to overcome them, and environmental destruction, suffocating individuals who internalize these ideologies which organize their actions. The tense clash between several protagonists with balanced screen time and drama culminate in a dynamic requiring the viewer to pay greater attention to establish each protagonists' behavioral relationships in their response to adverse events.

4.2 *Girls From Ipanema*

In this series, conflicts are experienced by characters whose traits differentiate their trajectories, profiles, subjectivities, and motivations. However, the construction of these women's plots contributes to a narratively denser display of the struggle against patriarchy.

As the story progresses, its protagonists are increasingly affected by each other's problems, which, though arranged

as parallel Miniplots, help to place intersectional feminism as the central theme of the series (Barrios 1995), i.e., ethnicity and class evidence issues of the political recognition of equality and respect for differences to overcome categories of power and subalternity. No wonder the narrative structure of the series often highlights how the female characters' socioeconomic status influence their positions, enabling a multifaceted view of women's status.

4.3 *Kissing Game*

In *Kissing* Game, the rapprochement between Fran, Chico, and Alex not only ensures the progression of the main line of action of the plot but also the thematic emergence of the series. What is evident is the constant tension between the opposite worlds of adults and adolescents.

The investigative foray of the characters to decipher the disease puts at stake students' sexuality. Moreover, the relationship between the characters pushes the dramatic arc of the series forward. On the other hand, adolescents confront their sexuality, family, and the conservative society of the city in which they live, highlighting the coming-of-age theme[1]. Centered around this generation gap, the discovery of sexuality and drug use are the premise for the developing drama.

The 'coming of age' theme is widespread in the world audiovisual scene, and we can mention productions from other countries, in a movement of approximation with *Boca a Boca*. From the emblematic *Wonder Years* (ABC, 1988-1993) to *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019-), productions involving this theme often represent a youth in high school and their emotional, identity and sexual issues. In Brazil's case, *Confissões de Adolescente* (TV Cultura, 1994-1996) and *Malhação* (TV Globo, 1995-) are the main examples of fiction with this theme, the latter is still airing, addressing current and pertinent themes to the youth universe.

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1   *Coming of age* comes from the adaptation of the German term *Bildungsroman*, which is the genre of novels that approach the maturation of the protagonist since childhood <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100045770>
However, it can be related to British literature since the 1850s, with books such as Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849-50). Currently, the term has been adapted to 'Coming of age' and is used to describe the category of films that fundamentally address the transition from childhood to adulthood and all the dilemmas of this path.

5. **CONCLUSION**

The analysis we developed in this part of the research revealed relevant elements of the complex seriality detected through the deviations of the classical model.

The shifting of the inciting incident led us to hypothesize that we are looking at a kind of intensified continuity of the norms of the classical model, in an approach similar to Bordwell's (2002) when he observed an intensified continuity generating a new style, which became dominant in American mass films. For the author, one of the reasons for this intensification was the need to hold viewers in front of the TV screen. Because as the television grew in popularity and commercial importance, it attracted future screenings of the films produced for movie theaters.

However, it should be stressed that what Bordwell (2002) argued does not mean a break from the traditional continuity model, but an intensification of established techniques. "Intensified continuity is traditional continuity amped up, raised to a higher pitch of emphasis. It is the dominant style of American mass-audience films today" (Bordwell 2002: 16). That is why it becomes possible to think about speeding up storytelling rules based on the notion proposed by the author. Given the dramaturgic change that it introduces by inserting peaks that grow in momentum until the ending, this acceleration demands viewers to invest more attention in the process of understanding the story, and alternate emotions more rapidly.

Moreover, anticipating the inciting incident establishes a new type of story presentation, accelerating the narrative pace. In *Kissing Game*, for example, this acceleration happens in the final seven minutes of the pilot episode in which the narrative shows us 16 new pieces of information.

The second expansion changes the line of argument and romance is no longer the central conflict. The central plot takes a different nature, whether in the form of a selective process, the professional trajectory of four women or the discovery of a mystery.

The third deviation concerns the plot structure based on the Multiplot design, with the protagonism diluted in individual arcs, complex in their own right. Such deviations seem to require increased attention from viewers to better follow the series.

Both the change in the line of argument and the multiplicity of heroes also require attention, because the viewer may not be able to identify and understand the evolution of individual narrative arcs. That is, to follow these series, it is

necessary to pay attention to the progression of the story and, at the same time, to follow the path of each protagonist and what is intertwined with it.

Such expansions encourage us to problematize the formulation of poetic narrative models of audiovisual drama that, at the limit, would help us think about a change curve applied to Brazilian (and Latin American) television drama.

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TV Shows

3% (2016-2020)
Girls from Ipanema (2019-2020)
Kissing Game (2020)