

# The syncretic strategies of the miniseries *Suburbia*\*

## *As estratégias sincréticas da narrativa da minissérie Suburbia*

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### ABSTRACT

The *Suburbia* miniseries, directed by Luiz Fernando Carvalho (Globo Television Network, 2012), turns the concept of pre-logical into a way to expose the multiple audiovisual aspect. The miniseries blends temporalities, causes a lack of definition between fiction and reality, and, through Roberto Carlos' ballads, emphasizes the dimensions of affection and faith in a community of Rio de Janeiro. Some points of the miniseries clarify the syncretic way that the narrative was shaped in and assess the possibility of a new trend to be explored in Brazilian television fiction. The analytical instruments are based in Raymond Bellour, the narrative examination is based in Kristin Thompson, and the idea of oral pre-logic cultures in Lévy-Bruhl.

**Keywords:** Television, serial, audiovisual analysis, syncretism

### RESUMO

A minissérie *Suburbia*, dirigida por Luiz Fernando Carvalho (Rede Globo, em 2012), faz do conceito de pré-lógico uma forma de expor o aspecto audiovisual múltiplo. *Suburbia* mistura temporalidades, provoca indefinição entre ficcional e real e, com baladas de Roberto Carlos, sublinha as dimensões do afeto e da fé em uma comunidade do subúrbio carioca. Pontos da minissérie esclarecem o modo sincrético com que foi moldada a narrativa e permite avaliar a possibilidade de uma nova tendência ficcional a ser explorada na ficção televisiva brasileira. O instrumental analítico tem base em Raymond Bellour e Jeremy Butler, o exame da narrativa se fundamenta em Kristin Thompson, e a ideia de culturas orais pré-lógicas em Lévy-Bruhl.

**Palavras-chave:** Televisão, minissérie, análise audiovisual, sincretismo

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# A

## INTRODUCTION

**D**IRECTED AND SCRIPTED by Luiz Fernando Carvalho, having Paulo Lins as co-writer, the miniseries *Suburbia* was aired by Globo Television Network from November 1 to December 20, 2012. Its eight chapters presented a story of the 1990s located mostly in Madureira, a poor suburban neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Almost all actors, including the main ones, composed a noteworthy Afro-Brazilian cast, contrasting with the Globo Network usual fiction shows.

The director said that to produce *Suburbia* he had put aside the official fiction vocabulary (Fonseca, 2012). That could mean a divergent attitude regarding the hegemonic narrative of television fiction, the so-called *classical television* (Thompson, 2003: 19-35). Products aligned to the latter, such as most of Brazilian *telenovelas* [television soap operas] try to “look like real life”. Therefore they consist of narrative constructions in which all aspects, whether audiovisual, scenography, actors’ performance and each production item concerning a television product combine to create a reality atmosphere. This process encompasses all the scenes to suggest that the whole story could be real, however unlikely or impossible it might be. Luiz Fernando Carvalho mentions as an example the miniseries *Os Maias* (Globo Network, 2001) in which he has worked “with the concern for a perfect filter, with an almost Renaissance look” (Fonseca, 2012). Recorded in Portugal, where the novel by Eça de Queiroz takes place, the miniseries *Os Maias* became famous for its historical reconstruction covering costumes, scenography, makeup and other aspects. It was an exquisite product of *classical television*.

Carvalho added that in *Suburbia* he was also supposed to go beyond all of his production after *Os Maias*, i.e., the miniseries that made him famous: *Hoje é Dia de Maria* (2005), *A Pedra do Reino* (2007), *Capitu* (2008) and *Afinal, o que Querem as Mulheres* (2010), all of them aired by Globo Network. It was all about breaking his own rules, which involved circus, opera and popular games: “Such filters protected me from reality. I could not stick to them anymore. I needed to dare more, to dive without fear of drowning in the sea of affections that common people experience with rigor and faith” (Fonseca, 2012).

Such statement could be the same smokescreen resource many film and television directors use to avoid further questions on their products. However, *Suburbia* has proven to be a true distinct initiative, not only as compared to the usual Brazilian television fiction, but also regarding the previous miniseries’ by Luiz Fernando Carvalho. If the first aspect is obvious to the audience, the latter becomes evident from a more accurate analysis. However, *Suburbia*

reveals other more significant aspects, which even professional critics might not clearly recognize as clearly as those.

Carvalho's aforementioned statements emphasize three fundamental factors: 1) the dramaturgy of reality; 2) the role of affections; 3) faith. In order to compose a story with those elements, his first step was going back in time and locating the story in a past experience or, more than that, making the timeline of the plot less linear. That would therefore contrast with the expected sequence of events of classical television. Secondly, documental and fiction instances had to be indistinct in the narrative strategy. Thirdly, it was necessary to let faith and affection dimensions arise so that the very idea of "suburb" could become the protagonist of the story.

Each one of those topics will be analyzed within the narrative structure of *Suburbia*. The aim is to detect empirical data that could corroborate the work hypothesis of studying the miniseries specificity concerning narrative composition. We will have to freeze the frame, as per Raymond Bellour's concept ("l'arrêt sur l'image") on film analysis (Bellour, 1979: 10-11), and conform it to television, as done by Thompson (2003) and Butler (2010), among others. Our focus will be on certain plot aspects, to point out those that could be unnoticed during reception. So our purpose is to clarify illustrate and understand the meaning of audiovisual and script solutions used by Luiz Fernando Carvalho and Paulo Lins.

It should be emphasized that the three mentioned resources (time indetermination, indistinctness between what is real and what is fiction, and the suburb as a protagonist, for its faith and affection dimensions), are the outcome of something that may be unique in the Brazilian television fiction. It is possible that *Suburbia* involves a strategy for an effect articulation as a pre-logical experience, since the core of the pre-logical thinking consists in erasing all duality<sup>1</sup>. So, in this analysis, syncretic narrative implies that "Logic and pre-logic [...] do not overlap, like oil and water within the same container. They interpenetrate each other resulting in a blend that makes it very difficult to separate them (Lévy-Bruhl, 1951: 113)<sup>2</sup>.

The above quotes from a classical anthropology textbook refer to the mentality of illiterate people from oral cultures anywhere in the world. Without having causality as a central category and without counting among its references the principles of Aristotelian logic, such people conceived the world in a way that did not comply with the reality of those who, at least since the ancient Greeks, have been guided by that category and those principles<sup>3</sup>. The pre-logic mentality, taken in this study without any elitist connotation, may be found in the culture of African people brought to Brazil as slaves. For them,

1. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl states that intimate communion assures "collective representations of the pre-logical thinking among beings who participate of each other's lives! The essence of participation consists precisely in abolishing all duality [...]" ("les représentations collectives de la mentalité prélogique n'assurent-elles pas entre les êtres qui participent les uns des autres! L'essence de la participation est que précisément toute dualité s'y efface [...]"; Lévy-Bruhl, 1951: 452).

2. In the original: "Le logique et le prélogique [...] ne se superposent pas en se séparant l'un de l'autre, comme l'huile et l'eau dans un vase. Ils se pénètrent réciproquement, et le résultat est un mélange dont nous avons grand'peine à laisser indistincts les éléments."

3. Reference to the three principles of Aristotelian logic which constitute the laws of a thinking coming from the Greeks to reach modern computer programming: 1) identity; 2) non-contradiction and 3) excluded middle.



4. Lévy-Bruhl was mentioned by Argentinian writer Júlio Cortázar in “Para uma poética” (1993) while examining narratives from the Eastern tradition that are less subject to logical and causal orders, such as novels and tales of his own. In this article we intend to show that *Suburbia* goes far beyond the incorporation of the pre-logic found in other Modernist literary and artistic products. Therefore its narrative may be considered as syncretic.

for instance, the person is simultaneously an individual with his privacy, and someone as part of a community. Our hypothesis is that in *Suburbia* that pre-logical mentality has been somehow combined to logical principles to generate a special narrative type yet to be specified<sup>4</sup>.

That is the crucial point to be clarified in *Suburbia*, as a prominent feature that suggests the first topic to guide the text: would there be a concept of the world underlying its plot, a vision of the world that has seldom been present in the Brazilian television fiction? Visions of the world are often disclosed through dialogues, voice-over, characters’ actions and the environments they live in. In a more intrinsic way, they can also be unfolded along the audiovisual composition and narrative. That is the leading hypothesis of this study: that the vision of the world articulating the story of *Suburbia* is so entrenched to that plot that it can only be recognized by analyzing its narrative.

That requires the assumption of some premises from television studies. Nothing could be more appropriate than the warnings against the essentialist representation of popular culture, or against classifying it as a degradation of the elitist culture (Martín-Barbero, 2006: 311); or even the observation that, in the gaps of commercial television, national talents may provide strategic cultural crossroads from each country (Martín-Barbero; Rey, 2001: 41). Although our target is not a *telenovela*, the Latin-American television manifestation par excellence, as studied by Martín-Barbero and Rey, but a sophisticated miniseries, we must emphasize that *Suburbia* has built a world rooted in popular culture, with its multiple faces, expressed by its orality, affections and faith. On the other hand, the sophistication itself could be associated to the concept of “complex narrative”. This has been used with respect to the innovations of the American television serial fiction since the 1990s, for instance, when episodic plots were associated to story arcs and continuous relationship dramas (Mittell, 2012: 29-52). That concept might apply to certain Brazilian productions and perhaps to some aspects of *Suburbia*. However, we will try to show that the traceable complexity of series and serials, whether national and foreign, keep little relation to the way Carvalho and Lins have dealt with the story of the young suburban Conceição. This is about a different kind of composition, where ingredients are not clearly articulated in cause-effect relationships but encompass new dimensions indicating to what extent the Brazilian television fiction may (or might) reach.

It could have been possible to refer to the concept of “hybrid culture” (Canclini, 2003) to analyze the cultural heterogeneity of a Latin-American product like *Suburbia*. Nonetheless, Canclini’s own argument to support

the adoption of the term “hybridity” makes this article follow a different trend:

One may find occasional mention of such terms as *syncretism*, *miscegenation* and other words to describe *hybridization*. I prefer the latter because it encompasses several intercultural mixes – not only the racial blends to which the term “miscegenation” usually limits itself – and because it enables us to include the modern forms of hybridization better than the “syncretism”, a formula that always refers to religious fusions or to fusions of traditional symbolic movements (Canclini, 2003: 19).

Since the hypothesis considered in this study relates to an undifferentiated religious fusion, the concept of “syncretic narrative” is more adequate to describe what happens in *Suburbia*.

Accordingly, it is worth asking whether *Suburbia* has inaugurated a paradigm that could be further explored in the Brazilian television. By the end of this text, we hope to have enough elements to clarify if other products could be generated according to the same proposal of combining dramaturgy of reality, affections and faith, not per a traditional perspective, but in line with the syncretic narrative composition of *Suburbia*.

## ECLIPSE OF THE HISTORICAL TIME

The synopsis of *Suburbia* reveals a trivial story. The black girl leaves her poor living conditions in the country community and moves to the big city. There, she will struggle against prejudice and violence to find happiness.

A more specific review shows Conceição (performed by the young girl Débora Fidelix Nascimento) living in miserable conditions with her parents and brother in a coal plant. A furnace explosion kills her brother and therefore her mother urges her to leave for a better life. Conceição goes to the city of Rio de Janeiro, where she is mistaken for a street child. She is arrested and taken to an institution for juvenile offenders. She escapes and is hit by a car driven by a woman who helps her and takes her to work as a maid for her family. So she starts living in a middle-class apartment. After some years, already as a young woman (performed by Erika Januza), she is sexually assaulted by her employer’s husband. Conceição manages to get rid of him and moves to the home of Vera (played by Dani Ornellas) in the poor suburban neighborhood of Madureira. Vera is her only friend and is also a maid in the neighborhood of Tijuca. Conceição falls in love with Cleiton (Fabricio



Boliveira), an attendant at a gas station, and disputes with threatening Jessica (Ana Pérola) the title of princess of the funk ball in Madureira.

That is the plot covering the first chapter and part of the second one. It provides a minimal portrait of the unfolding story.

**Time indetermination**

The backward turn in time should be understood as the first step to transform dramaturgy of reality, permeated by affections and supported by faith, into a story.

One relevant aspect is the ambiguity of the historic time, in which the past melts into a present narrative without the symbolic presence of time that would classify the space of “historical” facts. That structure was already present in the starting block of the miniseries where Conceição’s family worked in coal furnaces. The above reference to that episode is far from unveiling a central aspect: the mystic approach of the narrative. We prefer the word “mystic”, instead of the prevailing “mythical”, for the reason stated by Lévy-Bruhl (1951: 30):

I will use this word, in lack of a better one, not to suggest the religious mysticism of our societies, which is something very different, but in the sense strictly defined of “mystic” as being the belief in forces, influences, actions imperceptible to our senses, nevertheless real ones<sup>5</sup>.

During the seven minutes of that episode there is no evidence of realism, in spite of the allusion to slavery and to child labor exploitation, problems of the Brazilian society in the past that still remain, in case of the latter. The first scene starts with the protagonist as a young woman lightening a candle at a home altar with the statuette of a saint. The voice-over we hear is hers: “My name is Conceição.” That is a common narrative in audiovisual products: a homodiegetic narrator, that is, a character of the story to be told introduces the narrative (GENETTE, 1972: 252-259). As a rule, that narrator-character includes in his reports some facts he did not witness or about which he has obtained doubtful information: hence, Conceição’s voice-over refers to the letter her mother tried to write but never reached its destination. The audience sees her mother writing, as a proof of what is being said. However, the development of the story shifts: the audience hears the voice-over of Conceição’s mother, an old black woman (Serafina Terezinha), saying the text of the lost letter: “It’s been four years since you left. I remained alone in

5. “J’emploierai ce terme, faute d’un meilleur, non par allusion au mysticisme religieux de nos sociétés, qui est quelque chose d’assez différent, mais dans le sens étroitement défini où ‘mystique’ se dit de la croyance à des forces, à des influences, à des actions imperceptibles aux sens, et cependant réelles.” Usually the word “mythic” suggests meanings related to Greek mythology and other beliefs permeated by rationalized elements which therefore are not aligned to the cultural reality studied in this paper.



this burnt land...” The manipulation of the voice-over breaking expectations of keeping the focus on Conceição is a paradigmatic option of classical television. It brings a strange tone into the audiovisual discourse that had just begun. Other changes will succeed, with the narrative voices being those of Cleiton (Chapter 2), Conceição’s employer (Chapter 1) and Vera’s father (Chapter 2). That voice of Conceição’s mother was the first of many ruptures of the official television narrative vocabulary, according to the above statement of Luiz Fernando Carvalho.

The subsequent episode increases beyond the limits any possible feeling of strangeness. The image is framed from the interior of a wood construction, all light coming from the outside. It shows the coal furnace and Conceição’s father (Luiz Manoel) with a white mare in halter. The camera makes a track to capture the movement of the man and the animal approaching amid smoke and strong wind. Subsequently, the father is backwards holding the shotgun to kill the animal; the little girl Conceição runs to protect it; there is a new cut and the scene is now framed again by the wood construction showing father and daughter, mother beside him, the son and the mare by his side (Figure 1). We understand that the view from the inside of the wood house was not a point-of-view shot, despite having characteristics of that resource: an oscillating image, the framework from the characters’ eyelevel, as if peeping through the openings of the timber towards the door. The narrative acquires distinctive traits. Faded colors and unceasing wind allied to very unusual shots considering dramatic scenes according to the naturalistic pattern, that is, the mentioned goal of “looking real”: a close-up of the father aiming the shotgun, with a burst sunlight image behind him; the mare and the boy in a closed-up plan, low camera, against a pale and dusty sky, where one can see the blue and dead eyes of the animal; Conceição’s father framed by the same sky, saying that “it was born blind, it must be sacrificed”; her mother retorts harshly, in a shot similar to the father’s one; a detail plan shows the gun trigger hole against sunlight, a composition that would be considered wrong by the standards of naturalism, given the polluted visual that invades the screen. The drama advances in a quick edit pace, from different angles, while Conceição screams painfully in front of her father. That scene is a revival of an episode of *Vidas Secas*, from the Brazilian literature and movie, in which Fabiano executes Baleia, the family’s dog. However, death does not take place in *Suburbia*, as the father lowers the gun, overcome with pity.

# A



Figure 1 – *Suburbia*, “Chapter 1”

The unrealistic atmosphere of this passage is more comparable to stories of supernatural background than to any other movie or television production focused on realism. This applies even to the feature *Vidas Secas* (Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 1963), despite the similarities of the situations pictured. That scene of *Suburbia* could take place at any time since the XIX century, a time when rifles already existed. The opening block advances in the same way, with the discovery that the mare can see at night and therefore it gallops through the woods with the little girl. The furnace explosion is surrounded by an evil situation due to the evident narrative anticipation, produced by the suspense created by the *close-up* on the kerosene brass and the blaze, or by the rain falling from a blue sky, or by the chime of a mysterious and inexplicable bell upon which the father looks up to the sky a few seconds before everything goes through the air.

Instead of reciting all the audiovisual and narrative resources suggesting a mystical time, we would rather notice a reverse look towards Rio de Janeiro. Conceição finds among coal pieces a newspaper clipping displaying an image of Sugarloaf Mountain, described by her mother as “a mountain all made of sugar”. Thus, Rio de Janeiro is characterized in a mystical way to persist during Conceição’s arrival to the city. She awakes at the train station surrounded by a crowd of dancers from samba schools dressed in carnival costumes, creating a very different atmosphere from what the girl was accustomed to. At the bar of the station she is framed by the window in such a way that the red characters that have been painted thereon move, going from one side to the other,



according to the camera oscillations (Figure 2). That entire picture produces a magical effect to clash with upcoming realistic segments of the miniseries. So far at least, the narrative does not establish a historical time. The characters seem to float in a kind of limbo.



Figure 2 – *Suburbia*, “Chapter 1”

The narrative avoids any historical determination even when some items seem to allow it. The first reference to the historical time is made when Conceição’s new family watches the television news of the financial confiscation perpetrated by Fernando Collor’s government: March 16, 1990. The accuracy of the fact is opposed to controversial happenings, such as the children of her new family going to school while Conceição is still a little girl, and, some years later, when she becomes a young woman, the same children still seem to be three and five years old. It might be possible to rationalize that contradiction, but the lack of effort for a credible chronology is a significant evidence of the uncertain historical time of *Suburbia*.

Some other examples should also be mentioned. The lack of chronological definition of vehicles is noteworthy: a 147-Fiat belonging to Conceição’s employer, a Chevette, an Opala sedan and an Opala station wagon, beetles, a Kombi, the old Passat, models like Escort, Santana, Maverick and others from the end of the 1970s or early 1980s. Once more, one could try a naturalization solution, claiming that there were no vehicles of the 1990s on the streets throughout the story of *Suburbia*; or that the 147 Fiat seen out of the

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suburb belongs to Conceição's employer, who owns a beautiful apartment, but is a post-graduation student, probably with a low income. Yet when the boys rob the couple of foreign tourists at Aterro do Flamengo ("Chapter 1"), that is, in downtown area, shared by drivers of all social classes, there are only old fashioned cars: Volkswagen TL (from the end of the 1960s), Brazilian Passat, Beetles, Caravan Opala, Kombi (Figure 3). If the intention were to refer to the 1990s, it would have been possible to show here and there a vehicle of that time, which is not the case. The obvious exception is the motorcycle with a contemporary figure of the playboy who from the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter onwards harasses Conceição in her job at the gas station, evolving to sexual assault. The remaining components, gathered from heterogeneous times, prevent any attempt of chronological definition.



Figure 3 – Suburbia, “Chapter 1”

6. Diegesis is a term of Greek origin meaning narrative. It is used to name the world represented in movies or television fiction. Fictional characters or their equipment produces diegetic music, while extra-diegetic music cannot be heard by the characters, but only by the audience.

A second example of time indeterminateness is the outflow of Roberto Carlos' songs sung by the characters, thus diegetic, or listened by the audience as extra-diegetic elements<sup>6</sup>. Later in this article we will turn to those songs from the second half of the 1960s and early 1970s. Meanwhile it should be emphasized that they contribute to the narrative denaturalization, as they discontinue the hegemonic trend of classical television of soundtracks belonging to the time in which stories elapse.

Another example in the story, among others, is the representation of the suburb. Suburb should be understood here in the sense it has in Rio de Janeiro.

ro: it is not a *favela*, nor the outskirts of the town, and is not the same as the American suburb, which means a wealthy neighborhood around American cities (Oliveira, 2013: 18-25). The horizontality of *Suburbia* opposes to the verticality of *favelas*, an environment that has been much explored in Brazilian movies. Wide, leveled and quiet streets, with large houses – that is the scenario where Conceição, Vera and the other characters live, except Cleiton and his mother, who live in a *favela*. The idyllic setting of the street in Madureira can be noticed from the entrance flower decoration of the house where Mother Bia (Rosa Maria Colin) lives with her family. The backyard could not be more bucolic, with the father's (Haroldo Costa) birds, the pleasant tree shadows and the family gathering parties with sons, daughters, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law and neighbors. Such family configuration could be a realistic one any time but not while Rio de Janeiro was already immersed in the violence of gangs and drug dealers.



Figure 4 – Suburbia, “Chapter 2”

Definitely the “Rio de Janeiro suburb” as an object exists, but this mini-series does not show it from a strictly objective, historical or common sense perspective (as applies, in the latter instance, to the series *A Grande Família*, Globo Network, 2001-2014). In *Suburbia*, the signs of a mystical time coexist with a specific time overloaded with social issues. So the historical time seems to be covered by a veil that unfolds to show facts from the 1990s albeit shaded by a time already gone by.

Carvalho reiterates that *Suburbia* presents a reflection on matters the medias have left behind: “A new approach inspired by photographers like Walter Firmo have lead us to show a black family living in a suburb of Rio” (Carvalho, 2012). Among the pictures the film director refers to, some by Walter Firmo, from September 1968, were made for the *Manchete* magazine. They present

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Brazilian singer and composer Pixinguinha sitting on a rocking chair near an old mango tree at the cemented backyard of his house at Ramos suburb, in the northern zone of Rio de Janeiro (Figure 5).



Figure 5 – Pixinguinha (picture by Walter Firmo)

This is where in *Suburbia* (Figure 6) we can see the picture composition based on Walter Firmo:



Figure 6 – Mr. Aloisio, in Suburbia



Since the picture of Pixinguinha is from the 1970s and the plot of *Suburbia* takes place in the 1990s, it seems to be undeniable that the suburb portrait in the miniseries was constructed regardless of historical update.

### Orality and chronology

The historical time is abolished from *Suburbia*, which means establishing a symbolic proximity between past and present. The narrative presented in a time already gone emerges at an immediate space where it takes place<sup>7</sup>. The result may be considered as the past within the present: the time experience is ambiguous inasmuch as it is presented as a past experience disclosed in the present without clear signs of the past. Particularly in *Suburbia*, the arising time is crossed by the effective oral character of the narrative time.

Thus in the story told by *Suburbia*, it is irrelevant to distinguish the narrative and historical times. The narrative acquires, through the camera, an urgency that approaches it to the television newscast, by strategically bringing the action to the present time. So it is, for instance, when the camera captures what is going on at the funk ball (“Chapter 2”) and orchestrates the impossibility to register its overall drama. Possible fragments recorded by an “unplanned” camera can be noticed. The intention is not to cover all the events taking place at the ball, but rather suggest them, by leaving visible gaps amid the “dramatic chaos” of the action.

The funk ball shows three different dramatization stages: 1) the gathering of *Suburbia* main characters in the party context; 2) Cleiton is on the screen for the first time, standing in the crowd, as the only *Suburbia* protagonist who is not dancing; 3) hypnotized by Conceição’s dancing, Cleiton walks through the crowd to approach her. At that moment, the camera puts aside factual registration, and albeit for a short moment, concentrates on their staring and smiling to each other. Someone introduces Cleiton to Conceição and subsequently the camera resumes the registration of a suburban reality.

The oral temporality as a narrative effect erases the distance between the historical time of the action and its relevancy in the present. The distance between them disappears. Narrative choices dissipate the signs of the past in the story. Without those evidences, the facts ambiguously conform to the present in which they are produced and exhibited. Such arising into the present of past events within the story that is being told is possible by replacing the history symbolic temporality with an oral temporality that makes no distinction at all between diachronic and synchronic approaches. The narrative synchronic oral evidences dissipate all diachronic evidence of the History. Thus the narrative in a certain way joins those of oral cultures, as found in African people.

7. Luiz Fernando Carvalho says that *Suburbia* creates a “very particular universe of a black family where memory still has a refuge. In spite of all contradictions that were already present at that time (1990), the suburb appears as a place that stopped in time and where things seem to be perennial” (Carvalho, 2012).



## SUBURBIA AFFECTIONS

Two aspects should be considered in the game between affection and faith: the former is syncretic and is found at the very surface of the narrative; the second one is a mixture (Oliveira, 1977: 35) or the “sum or addition” (Santos, 1977: 26) that in the case of *Suburbia* is inherent to the structure of the story. Both aspects are present in *Suburbia*: the syncretic, in the way sociabilities are presented; and the mixture comes out from the narrative effects. In the syncretic aspect, ancestry is a major modulating element clearly seen in the production of what we denominate “brotherhood”<sup>8</sup>. The mixture is “the individual practice or adhesion to various religious beliefs that does not directly affect any of the religious systems” (Oliveira, 1977: 36). The miniseries shows an indiscriminate mixture of religious creeds which converge to building a unique dramatic effect. This will culminate in the amazing miracle at the end, when Cleiton survives the innumerable shots and the river waters.

In *Suburbia*, along with the sociability space of faith, there is affection too, which could only be captured by a camera that is apparently used randomly, although it captures the events in a “spontaneous” way. That is, a camera that does not try to be constantly aware of what is going on. It makes clear not to be sure of what is happening and does not search logical sequences. Instead, it registers the immediate action as though it had caught it. The camera tries to give a natural tone to the narrative as opposed to fictional stories and with characters clearly featured according to the conventional television drama.

Nevertheless there is a mediator between the story and the narrative serving as a suture as it intermediates the relationship between the narrative effect of reality and the fictional *pathos* of the story: Roberto Carlos’ ballads, an atmosphere that mixes emotion and faith in search of true love, of the genuine love that never fades like the burning of an eternal flame<sup>9</sup>.

By considering Roberto Carlos’ songs as part of the story, the narrative seems to swing between longing and a happy sadness. The universe of the already happened, in which things was gone, impregnates the narrative, which is driven by timelessness of its circumstantially oral aspect. Thus Conceição’s itinerary shows the “happy sadness” paradox of the ballads with a clue of resigned melancholy. Some of the songs evoke a warm affection generated by the “inseparable intertwining of the world and its meaning for each individual” (Breton, 2009: 126). Under such condition, “the emotion is the reverberation of a past, present or future event, whether real or not, from the individual’s relationship with the world” (Breton, 2009: 113). It shows that emotion as an event itself, as it turns Conceição into an affectionate presence in the world (Breton, 2009: 111) that she has shaped for herself. A net of multiple feelings

8. According to black cultural tradition, in a “brotherhood” (irmanação) families are not primarily formed by biological relationships. The most important relation is the common energy connecting individuals, the feeling of belonging to the same affective vibration. In that sense the candomblé refers to the “sons of orixá” (a specific energy in the black nagô cosmogony).

9. Although the research about the Brazilian popular music has been productive in the Communication field, we are not aware of studies that show the Brazilian song as an expressive resource as detected in this paper concerning Roberto Carlos’s songs in *Suburbia*.



are crystallized in particular intensities: joy, wrath, desire, surprise or fear, besides anger and love, which would be more deeply rooted in time. Roberto Carlos' songs act like knots, which give substance to the narrative since they are immediately captured and kept at a kind of a pre-logical level.

The ballads are so part of the story and of the narrative, that is, the song fragments heard seek an even-point between diegetic and extra-diegetic. In a syncretic experience, those fragments outline the story and display it. They are ceaselessly divided into telling and/or retelling and presenting the very idea of a suburb modulating a time that does not pass by, or has not passed by – and is always in remembrance. The main source of affection is the long time span that does not move onward and, as Roberto Carlos would say, is still at a distance – at a place where it cannot be reached anymore, where the world is different, while here happiness is sad.

We transcribe below the first Roberto Carlos song in *Suburbia*. It is in the first chapter of the story, showing Conceição since she was a little girl until she becomes a young woman, at her employer' home:

Today I hear the songs you have made for me

I don't know why everything has changed  
 Those songs are still here, but you aren't  
 You have forgotten so many things you once told me  
 So many things that only the two of us have shared  
 I believe you don't even remember them  
 It's so difficult to look at the world and see  
 All the things that are still there  
 Since without you my world is different  
 My joy is sad  
 So many times you've told me you loved me  
 So many times I've wiped your tears  
 And now I cry alone, you're no longer by my side.

(“The songs you made for me” from Roberto Carlos's *The Inimitable* music album, 1968)

The song is played almost completely and is also used to express the passage of time and as such it goes from diegetic to extra-diegetic. That same song appears in “Chapter 8” when Cleiton asks Conceição to get back together. The song starts when Cleiton begs her, in front of her house: “Just tell me one word, a single word, and our love will be safe”. The soundtrack reproduces the excerpt of the song until “So many things that only the two of us have shared”.

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Then Roberto Carlos's song fade-out is followed by a slight echo and disappears from the soundtrack.

"Chapter 5" shows the end of the relationship between Conceição and Cleiton with a shift of the narrative perspective that brings the young man into the first plan. By shifting the focus from Conceição to Cleiton, Roberto Carlos vanishes again to return at the end of "Chapter 6". By then, Cleiton has already become the leader of the *favela* upon killing his brother's murderer. Almost at the end of the chapter, he parks a yellow Opala in front of Conceição's house. She is sweeping the yard. The soundtrack now is "The Divan" (from the *Roberto Carlos* music album, 1972): "Those memories kill me/That's why I'm here". The same song starts "chapter 7", this time with the opening verses:

I remember the house with a balcony,  
many flowers in the window  
My mother inside telling me – smiling,  
but in her teardrop there was a warning -  
telling me to be careful  
as I left towards the future  
I was still pure  
but with a kiss I said goodbye...

The song lasts until Cleiton sees Conceição, returns to the car and leaves. In the same chapter, when Conceição and Cleiton meet at the procession in honor of Saint Benedict, he sings a part of "I love you, I love, you, I love you" (from Roberto Carlos's *The inimitable* music album, 1968):

It has been a long time away from you  
Let me at least talk to you  
The distance will not prevent me  
from meeting you again, my darling.

Letters are not enough anymore  
I want to hear your voice  
I am going to call you just to say  
that I am almost dying  
because I miss you too much.

I love you!

I love you!

I love you!

After Cleiton's singing in a rough and tuneless way, Conceição rejects him. That song had first appeared hummed by Conceição, while she swept the yard at the house of Mr. Aloysio's and "Mother" Bia, after she had met Cleiton at the funk ball ("Chapter 2"). Also in that chapter, the same song was the backdrop for the first kiss between Cleiton and Conceição at Vera's birthday picnic party at Ramos beach. Again, during return from the picnic the same song was played, "I love you, I love you, I love you". Cleiton repeats the lines of "The Divan": "Those memories kill me". At the end of "chapter 2", Roberto Carlos sings "And I am not going to leave you alone again" (from Roberto Carlos's *The inimitable* music album, 1968) that confirms their relationship:

If you have been waiting for a great love  
all of your life  
and feeling sad you have even cried  
Hopeless to find someone  
I tell you now, I was alone too  
And had no love for me.

While driving his Kombi, Tião (Nelly) asks Conceição: "What would you like to hear?", and she replies: "Black Cat" (from Roberto Carlos's music album *Roberto Carlos*, 1966). Tião replies: "Black Cat"? That's a really old one!" An excerpt of the song follows:

I am the chilling black cat  
And this life of mine is really a painful one  
My boldness stops there on a roof  
I am the black cat, I am the black cat

I'll tell you now my sad story  
And after you hear me I know you'll be crying  
For a long time I've not known what good food is  
I am the black cat, I am the black cat

I was given seven lives to live  
Seven chances I have got to win  
But if I don't eat I'll end up in a hole

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I am the black cat, I am the black cat.

Being diegetic and extra-diegetic simultaneously, the music leaves the foreground to the second plan when Conceição's voice adds sentences like: "I love watching life as it really passes by. The more we can live in this world, the better". "Black Cat" returns as a foreground sound playing the chorus and stops. Even in a situation of apparent joy, distinguished by a happy melancholy, Conceição cannot forget her "sad story".

Roberto Carlos is at the same time an aspect of the narrative and a character of the story. He joins to the things that were told, while he shapes the narrative. In other words, he is a kind of an oracle that guides the story while modeling the narrative, painting it with the oral resources of suburban imagination. In *Suburbia*, Roberto Carlos represents the result of the syncretic movement that the narrative determines as form of expression when it combines the simulacrum of reality with an impressive fictional construction. For that reason the narrative of this miniseries is remarkably transparent and at the same time particularly opaque.

### GOING AHEAD WITH FAITH

Undoubtedly the moment of *Suburbia* that best conforms the relation between affection and faith is in "Chapter 8", when Cleiton bears witness of his resurrection in the Lord. The pastor announces:

It is with joy, with this great party that tonight we will present to the heaven and to the church a new Cleiton, purified and redeemed by Jesus' blood [some chords of "The Man", from music album *Roberto Carlos*, 1973, are heard]. Cleiton, in the name of Jesus, would you come here!

Roberto Carlos sings the first verses:

Once a man came here  
he looked at the world in a way no one had ever looked  
so beautifully  
His song was a prayer  
And his talk was the most beautiful song ever sung  
His voice talked only about love  
All his gesture was love  
And his heart was full of peace

He walked through the fields

Climbed mountains and talked about the greatest love of all.  
 He made light shine in the darkness  
 and sun raise in each heart that could understand his words...

When Cleiton's testimony starts, Roberto Carlos goes to the second plan until vanishing. Meanwhile Conceição approaches the church entrance. She stops at the door and the music ceases. After his testimony, he hugs his mother, Mrs. Margarida (Maria Salvadora), hugs and thanks Mr. Aloysio for his presence and, while he embraces Mother Bia, who follows the umbanda religion, her evangelic daughter, Vera, walks to the doorway to embrace the catholic Conceição (Figure 7).



Figure 7 – Suburbia, “Chapter 8”

Then the following dialogue is heard:

**Vera:** You see, Cleiton... He trusts God, he's a new creature, a new person, my sister.

**Conceição:** I can see that, Vera. Cleiton has really changed.

[...]

**Cleiton:** God said we'll never reach peace nor glory but through him. I want to do that, Conceição. I want to take the glory of the Lord to everyone, and to your heart too.

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**Conceição:** Do you think that if I didn't have God in my heart I would have prayed for you as much as I did, Cleiton?

**Cleiton:** Sorry, Ceição. Sorry... I...

**Conceição:** I have great faith. Our Lady accompanies me wherever I go. I have prayed a lot for you, I've made promises, Cleiton.

**Cleiton:** I...Didn't...I...I... (the first chords of "The Divan" start being played)  
I'm sorry for everything... Thanks for coming.

Cleiton is disturbed and walks towards his mother (she says: "You have been saved, my son") and they hug each other. At this very moment, Roberto Carlos sings the first lines of the song, until "But in her teardrop there was a warning".

When Conceição says "I have great faith", the connection she makes between faith and affection is evident. Affection is only possible for those who live with faith. However, faith, like love in Roberto Carlos's songs, generates a time without temporalities. It is a time affectively close to oral forms because it is past and present simultaneously, as well as individual and collective. Hence the time in *Suburbia*, like in Roberto Carlos's songs, seems to be static. That way of building the world is the same found in pre-logical forms. An entire world represented without the particular logic of its parts. Material and spiritual aspects are inseparable, as they belong to the same reality of the world. Faith, love and all affections are inseparable; the multiple is one. Everything is at the same time mixed and correlated. The individual embodies the whole, as well as the whole is expressed by the individual. Therefore it would not make sense at all trying to find out what is the specific faith observed in *Suburbia*. If we consider how that aspect impregnates the narrative, then the syncretic nature of the latter becomes clear.

In the narrative game of *Suburbia*, the lack of distinction between religiosity and sociability is a procedure that shapes the story, just like the impossibility to separate individual and collective procedures that determine a person and a family, for instance. Considering that in the story it makes no sense distinguishing public and private spaces, both occupy an indifferent place. Therefore, the narrative strategies have a syncretic character in this miniseries. Within the same syncretic context one can find the manner as the suburb is shown and performed as a symbol of a cultural identity.

### CONCLUSION

At this point, after having indicated and explained some of the main characteristics of *Suburbia*, nothing could emphasize better its specificity within the



context of the Brazilian television than a comment on the most successful television fiction production of the recent times, *Avenida Brasil* (Globo Network, 2012). Notwithstanding the undeniable qualities of that *telenovela* regarding the composition of its characters, audiovisual language, production and other aspects, its huge differences as compared to *Suburbia* should be clarified. In spite of that, both stories take place in the poor suburban area of Rio de Janeiro. It should be noticed that *Avenida Brasil* has a huge quantity of dialogues, mainly at dinner time at Tufão's family. However, there was few or none orality in the sense we consider it in this study, marked by the disregard of the historical time in *Suburbia*. Too much affections have structured the melodramatic trait of *Avenida Brasil*, however, without the cultural framework of *Suburbia*, already outlined. There, faith was limited to Carminha's hypocritical fanaticism. In short, contrarily to *Suburbia*, *Avenida Brasil* was a whitened product, not because black actors were practically absent in the suburban environment of Divino (with the customary exceptions made to subaltern characters): it is an anti-syncretic narrative, as traditionally seen in the Brazilian television fiction.

If Luiz Fernando Carvalho and Paulo Lins succeeded in innovating in *Suburbia*, it was not just for having replaced white actors with black ones in a story that could be experienced by any person. Their most striking innovation was bringing to the drama construction and to the narrative the vision of the world from cultures of African origin. By doing so, they have transformed into narrative strategies the syncretic features that many of those cultures have acquired in Brazil. One of them is the non-distinction between the space of sociability and the religious space, which are effectively connected by the faith that determines what we are supposed to be in the world. From that close relationship, in which the mystic usually permeates the daily routine, the emotion of the world springs. Such emotion characterizes each person's life as a unit within the multiple. The world is multiple in what I am because it is a unity of faith and emotion. Through the multiple everything becomes connected, mixed. There are no subdivisions in life. It is, instead, a unique performance of different dimensions.

This is how one can hear Mr. Aloysio's thanksgiving prayer, in "Chapter six":

I would also like to thank for this very special opportunity in my birthday with my sweet and tolerant Bia. But I would also join my thankfulness to all the saints who since our past have been protecting us and watch over us: Our Lady of the Rosary of Black Men, Saint Elesbão, Xango, Ogun, Yemanjá, Oxum, all of them.



That may be seen as one more answer to the question about a possible world conception underlying the narrative of *Suburbia*, as proposed in the first pages of this article: indeed, there is a rare vision of the world that articulates the narrative. However, it does not correspond to a specific determined people or to a unique religion – it is a syncretic vision.

Finally, as a response to the second question proposed in the Introduction, that is, whether *Suburbia* could have inaugurated a paradigm to be explored in the Brazilian television, we could say that there is no evidence that Globo Network Television will ever assume such model in the near future, at least significantly within its fictional production. After all, one cannot forget that the miniseries was exhibited on a practically inaccessible time and, chiefly, its second season was cancelled. Carvalho has even returned to his post-modernist poetry in the *telenovela Meu pedacinho de chão* (2014). Moreover, since 2013 there has been no other product aligned to *Suburbia*.

Nonetheless, it is not unlikely that other screenwriters and directors, from that TV station or from another one, will ever assimilate the experience of *Suburbia*. So has been for a long time the history of television, where narrow openings were and continue to be found in apparently monolithic and unchangeable productions. Consequently, some TV programs have carried out experiences aligned to pioneering productions and so have allowed the innovation to gradually consolidate. ■

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