

Maria Immacolata Vassallo de Lopes and the 30 years of Center for Telenovela Studies at USP: a journey narrated by teleficcion

Maria Immacolata Vassallo de Lopes e os 30 anos do Centro de Estudos de Telenovela da USP: uma jornada narrada pela teleficção

Interview with

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WHILE DINING, A family talks about what they will watch: they guess who the killer will be, share wishes for the protagonist's happiness, distill feelings of revenge and compassion towards the villain. In a few hours, the streets become deserted. The country watches TV. For decades, the scene described above was a of the moment when the final chapter of a *telenovela* is aired in Brazil, a genre that culturally and historically mobilizes passions, narrates realities near and far from the viewer, constructs imaginaries about what it is to be Brazilian – within the national territory and in the countries where these stories are exported to. In a time when streaming platforms enter the country and changes to the business structure of making television fiction are underway, the menu of content available to the public is vast.

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Maria Immacolata Vassallo Lopes and 30 years of Center for Telenovela Studies at USP

However, the researcher Maria Immacolata Vassallo de Lopes defends her thesis: “the *telenovela* is the main cultural product of Brazilian television.”

The affirmation is based on a solid career in the field of communication. First an undergraduate in Social Sciences from the University of São Paulo and holding a master’s and PhD in Communication Sciences from the same institution, also having been a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Florence (Italy), Immacolata has dedicated herself to the study of *telenovelas* for decades. Her studies in the area began after her master’s, when she observed the reception of radio by popular classes, and doctoral studies, when she worked on the construction of a theoretical-methodological model for research in the field of Communication. Driven by the desire to understand the reception of media by the masses, it was during the transition from the 1980s to the 1990s that Immacolata approached studies on this type of narrative.

In 1992, already a professor at the School of Communications and Arts (ECA) at the University of São Paulo (USP), she participated in the creation of the Telenovela Research Center (NPTN) – today, the Center of Telenovela Studies (CETVN), at the invitation of Professor José Marques de Melo. At the time, the institution’s director challenged the School’s faculty to create research centers on topics that were academically relevant to them. According to Immacolata, this was a “visionary” attitude that led to the emergence of research centers in Communication at USP. Remembering the first years of the group, Immacolata recalls that she had to face the prejudice of those who did not recognize the *telenovela* as a scientific object of study.

In the face of resistance, she and other researchers remained focused on institutionalizing television fiction studies in Brazil. Immacolata was there as the group supported individual research projects, obtained funding from the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP), the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), and the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Capes), established partnerships with Grupo Globo and the Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics (Ibope¹), created a Working Group on Television Fiction at the Brazilian Congress of Communication Sciences (Intercom), joined the Ibero-American Observatory of Television Fiction (OBITEL²), among other achievements. Meanwhile, she also shared her work at hundreds of events, many of which she organized; published dozens of articles and books, some of which became mandatory literature, such as *Vivendo com a telenovela: mediações, recepção, teleficcionalidade* (Living with the *telenovela*: mediations, reception, television fictionality) (Editora Summus, 2002), co-authored with Vera da Rocha Resende and Silvia Helena Simões Borelli; she also supervised the studies of more than 70 students, from undergraduate to post-doctoral studies.

¹ Today, Kantar IBOPE Media.

² International network of researchers from 12 countries that aimed to identify the diagnosis and perspectives of television fiction by annual monitoring and comparative, quantitative, and qualitative analysis of the many formats of the genre.

In 2022, a time of undeniable recognition of fictional television narratives as symbolic builders of the Brazilian nation, Immacolata celebrated the 30 years of CETVN with her team. The group met weekly on Friday afternoons to work on ongoing research, plan new projects, and think about television fiction in Brazil. Over the decades, the group continues to adapt. During the pandemic, face-to-face meetings became remote, allowing the safe participation of researchers from different locations in the country. Regarding the focus of her studies, she also expanded her field, analyzing other narratives besides the *telenovela*, broadcasted both on TV and streaming services: “we research television fiction, wherever it is.”

On a Friday morning, July 8, 2022, Professor Maria Immacolata Vassallo de Lopes spoke with **MATRIZes** via Google Meet, recalling the period of creation of the first *telenovela* research center in Brazil, talking about the trajectory to strengthen studies in the area in the country, and reflecting on the current state of investigations in the field of television fiction.

MATRIZes: In 2022, the Center of Telenovela Studies (CETVN) celebrates 30 years of foundation. After these three decades, what remains and what has changed in this research center?

Maria Immacolata Vassallo de Lopes: Let’s start from the beginning. . . The designation Center of Telenovela Studies is recent and was adopted when I became the coordinator, to fit the terminologies of the School of Communications and Arts. The Center started as NPTN, that is, the Telenovela Research Center. It was created by an initiative of Professor [José] Marques de Melo when he was principal of the School. In 1992, he encouraged the creation of several research centers at USP. He was a visionary, worked in anticipation, he instigated this and other centers on various themes.

The Telenovela Center was a daring one! Still in the 1990s, having a research group on *telenovela* within USP. In this context, the creation of the NPTN took place at the same historical time as my study on the subject and that would be published as *Vivendo com a telenovela* (2002), a project supported by FAPESP and CNPq. It was also related to other Latin American studies on this object. Jesús Martín-Barbero, for example, was an encourager of studies on fictional television narratives, as a historical-cultural product not only of Brazil, but of Latin America as a whole. This was the background for the institutionalization of this research area.

Initially, the Center began doing many actions, such as research development, creation of a working group at Intercom on Serial Fiction. It was a range of relationships that began to establish itself in the scientific field, as Bourdieu would say, where everything converged and interrelated.

At that time, the coordinators were the professors Anamaria Fadul [1992-1997], Maria Aparecida Baccega [1997-2000] and Solange Martins Couceiro de Lima with Maria Lourdes Motter [2000-2005]. This period was the beginning, the first phase, an installation phase, during which a very important work was done.

MATRIZes: When we think about these early years, what are the legacies of these researchers for the Center?

MIVL: Despite the studies, an important work of building the infrastructure of the Center was done. It was necessary to request a room, materials, furniture, computers.

Our institutional relations had also begun. Right at the beginning, we partnered with TV Globo. When researchers, national and from other countries, needed scenes, we would get in touch to assist them.

During this phase, we also gathered an archive that made history, an outstanding collection related to television fiction, organized by Professor Maria Ataíde Malcher and supported by FAPESP. It was a collection with materials from newspapers, theses, dissertations, costumes, scripts. . . At that time, it was important to have that, because we were an open center to welcome and support researchers who needed materials and sources for their studies on television fiction.

Then a very sad event happened. On October 2, 2001, ECA suffered a large fire, which mainly took over the second floor of the central building, exactly where the NPTN room was. I remember Maria Malcher's affection and pride for that collection very well, we all felt it, because it was so expensive. The archive worked wonderfully, all you had to do was ask for something! This fire destroyed the second floor, ruined our entire collection, everything we had done, the original research material for *Vivendo com a telenovela*, the software that we had used. It was all there. That was a tragedy for us all, we could not even look at it. All the rooms were reduced to ashes, where we once saw a poster or photograph. It was a very hard time. We could not look at it without being reduced to tears.

We thus created the *SOS Telenovela* campaign to start rebuilding the collection. We asked: "Do you have a script, photograph or magazines about *telenovelas*? Donate them us!" So, we received wonderful materials. If it happened today, it would be something shared in social medias, but that was how we could do it, by word of mouth, to begin our reconstruction.

MATRIZes: Since the beginning, the Center focused in academic studies on television fiction. What is the importance of these studies in the context of the time?

MIVL: It was surprising! It also caused astonishment within USP itself since it was a novelty. Whenever I started describing the Center, it was as if people

had never looked at *telenovelas* as an object of study. This came along with a prejudice of thinking that studying *telenovelas* was not important. We started a work to conquer spaces.

I remember a FAPESP seminar in England. There were people from Education, Physics, Medicine and they invited me to talk about *telenovelas*. And you will not believe it! After my presentation, the president of FAPESP came close to me and said, “Immacolata, I’m a *noveleiro* (an adjective for *telenovelas* fans!)” [laughs]

The whole country watched *telenovela*. However, there was a lot of prejudice. In Italy, cinema is THE heritage. And do I have to say anything about the United States and Hollywood? There are Hollywood ambassadors all over the world. Each country is proud of its best product. Here it was the opposite, exactly the opposite.

When the country’s largest university accepted this research center, it was a victory. It was a stimulus to researchers from all over Brazil. We started to meet in seminars, in congresses. . . This was a process of proving a quality of research and, at the same time, of gaining a solid reputation and institutionalization of this object. In this process, we started projects such as OBITEL [Ibero-American Observatory of Television Fiction], OBITEL-Brazil [Brazilian Network of Television Fiction Researchers], the Television Working Group of Intercom and, later, Compós [National Association of Graduate Programs in Communication], and many other achievements. We got to places where we could publicize and discuss studies on fictional television storytelling.

In fact, few people know, but for many years CETVN has been working on a project on “Theses and Dissertations on Television Fiction.” We started by recording the first studies in the area, where they were made, at the master and doctoral levels. Today, I think it would be fantastic to survey TCCs [Final Papers], because we realize that our studies also expanded to undergraduate studies, where they had no insertion. If anyone wants to know the first studies of the area, we have this.

And you see, when I reminisce about the time of my first studies, I wanted to study *telenovela* in my master’s and Professor Ruth Cardoso told me that it was not the time. That was in the 1980s. She convinced me to study radio, so, I could then reach *telenovela* as a massive cultural product. My master’s degree was actually about “the radio of the poor”, about the reception of popular radio programs. It was later published under the title *O Rádio dos Pobres. Comunicação de Massa, Ideologia, e Marginalidade Social*. It was a difficult time to study *telenovela* due to the visual part. We had to write down while it aired or gather the scripts to analyze. We could even ask Globo for some scenes, some chapters, but direct observation like we do nowadays was impossible. The videotape, when television materials ceased to be live and began to be pre-recorded,

was a historical milestone for us, a total change of possibilities, it caused a remarkable growth to audiovisual studies.

These are the many results. Everything began to emerge in groups, associations, graduate courses.

MATRIZES: You defined the initial years of the Center, until 2005, as the first phase, of installation. What was the later moment like?

MIVL: When I took over the coordination of NPTN, I started thinking about collective projects. I wanted to experiment. I wanted to keep what was already happening, an open center to researchers, a counter of sorts, a library on television fiction. I thought I could continue like this, but that it was necessary to start building a collective work, to involve and intertwine people in a common research project. This moment marked the birth of the idea of OBITEL.

MATRIZES: By the way, how did the creation of OBITEL take place?

MIVL: The creation of a research observatory for television fiction was already well articulated in my mind. Which is why I went to do a post-doc³ with Milly Buonanno⁴. At the time, Milly had created a slogan about television fiction in Italy: *l'Italia nella fiction, la fiction in Italia* – Italy in television fiction and television fiction in Italy (free translation). In this wordplay, the nation was in television and television was in the nation. From this idea, studying fiction in Italy, it was necessary to observe Berlusconi's channels and public television, RAI. It was necessary to study all the grids and analyze all the products that were aired. This is potent in terms of methodological proposal. Milly had also created Eurofiction, the Observatory of Television Fiction in Europe. At the time, it was a research network composed by five countries: England, Spain, France, and Germany, besides Italy itself.

I could have done my post-doctoral research with Jesús [Martín-Barbero], but I went to Italy to specifically look for a methodology to develop what was in my mind, to create an observatory, which would later become OBITEL. It was all due to the time I spent in that country.

In fact, when I had the first idea about the observatory, it was already to inaugurate it to study television fiction in Brazil. At first, OBITEL was not meant to be an international network. However, the OBITEL project was much more embraced by Latin America and Iberian countries, by researchers from other countries who, by joining OBITEL, began to create their own national observatories. Initially, a group of eight researchers from different countries met for intellectual and fraternal affinities and wrote the letter of foundation of OBITEL, in 2005, at the Pontifical Javeriana University, in Bogotá. Then, it took us about a year to elaborate the first methodological protocol of a network that was international, so it had to account for both the specific realities and what

³ Immacolata developed her postdoctoral studies at the Università degli Studi di Firenze, in Italy, in 2001 and with funding from the São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP).

⁴ Professor Emeritus of Television Studies at the Università di Roma La Sapienza, Italy.

was common between the countries, as well as, especially, to reduce a universe of theoretical and methodological references to be adopted by each one.

In 2007, the OBITEL project published its first Yearbook⁵, with quantitative, qualitative, and comparative analyses. During a period, OBITEL published the Yearbook in three printed books: one in Portuguese, one in Spanish, and one in English. After a while, the publication also went digital, which is the exclusive format today. On the other hand, OBITEL Brasil, was then created in 2007, in São Paulo, to be the Brazilian branch of OBITEL. In total, 10 existing and recognized research groups, from various regions of the country, met and began to work their own methodology, conducting a thematic, collective, and biennial research.

MATRIZES: The collective studies are, in fact, a hallmark of CETVN. In 2022, despite the OBITEL Yearbook and the biennial book of OBITEL Brasil, CETVN developed a collaborative⁶ project with researchers from the Federal University of Paraíba, mapping the conditions of existence and the challenges of the production of independent Brazilian audiovisual in the Northeast and in the Rio-São Paulo axis. This project, by going into the field and interviewing producers to understand its dynamics, has a connection to the television fiction industry. How can it contribute to the professionalization of the audiovisual market in Brazil?

MIVL: The concern with the training and professionalization of independent producers is there from the beginning. We start from the interviews with producers, but we want the data to return to them and also to reach schools, undergraduate and graduate students. It is something that is already inscribed in the very project. We want the readers of the study to be primarily non-academic.

This was also in OBITEL's founding letter: we did not want a merely academic observatory. Therefore, we should obtain market data collected by monitoring and contemplated in the analysis materials. We wanted professionals to read the Yearbooks and the Yearbooks to be used in the classroom.

We did not imagine that we would be awarded by the FAPESP/FAPESQ Notice. This was a project that came up and added to the two [projects] of OBITEL, all within CETVN. We all have learned a lot. I also have to say that this contact with production, with the process of creation, has greatly influenced my thoughts and reflections. Especially knowing that production studies need to be further developed in Brazil.

MATRIZES: What horizons do you envision for television fiction studies in the country?

MIVL: I will situate my optimism in a macro view, because I am a person who has not only been following the history of the field of Communication in Brazil but has been a part of it since the beginning. My generation, of course!

⁵Scientific publication of OBITEL International in which, from a common methodological protocol, the fictional television production of the previous year in each country of the Network is mapped. Five fictional television dimensions are analyzed: production, exhibition, consumption, commercialization, and thematic proposals.

⁶The project "Creative economy of independent Brazilian audiovisual: the role of creativity and the impact of innovation on the productive scenario of national television series. Evaluation and Proposals," contemplated by an Agreement between FAPESP and the State of Paraíba Research Foundation (FAPESQ).

I see that, despite all the problems that have come with public science policies, with governments, there is a lot of power in the field of Communication. There is still a lot to do, there is a lot of room to grow, to diversify studies and research. I defend Brazilian and internationalized studies, in collectives, just as CETVN has been doing.

When I think of the new generations, I believe that we have to closely follow TCCs, to observe what is in the minds of young people, because they are facing the new communicational phenomena, the new study methodologies. We know that they are preferably involved with the help of streaming, we need to understand these new interests and keep up. The professors who teach Theory or Methodology should encourage research on products of fiction, be it *telenovelas* or series, newer or older, to be able to broaden the discussion, because otherwise we end up talking only among ourselves, only in the research groups of the graduate program. I feel hopeful seeing more undergraduate students in research groups of television fiction, and applying to have undergraduate research scholarships in this area, but there is still a lot to achieve. It is good to remember that the Intercom Junior is a mirror of all Work Groups and it is very important to observe what is happening with the Junior Work Group of Serial Fiction.

MATRIZES: To wrap up, where does your love for television fiction and studies on this object come from?

MIVL: To answer that, I have to make an important parenthesis: to say who I am.

I am Immacolata from the Center of *Telenovela* Studies, OBITEL, Intercom, and all that I have mentioned. I am also a professor and researcher of Communication Methodology. Throughout my academic journey, I have brought everything that I considered to be high-quality research to the study of fiction. I like to keep that connection alive. Some may find it strange, but my areas of interest in Lattes are epistemology and *telenovela*. Sometimes I think a lot about who I am, where I came from, and why these choices. The intellectual trajectory is within one's life story, they are our personal marks.

The first point of my story is that my class origin is popular. I was born in the popular class of Italy, the one that emigrated after the war. First, my father traveled alone to Brazil in the 1950s. Once he was established, he called the family. I was in elementary school and was already literate when I was forced to emigrate with my mother and siblings. I lived the whole trajectory of a family of migrants, with its tragedies and dramas, its hopes and struggles. I am the youngest of three siblings, the first to attend university. Since I was doing very

well in my studies and achieved a scholarship, I could study without working. When I got into Social Sciences at USP, it was a great happiness for me and my family. It was a very difficult course to get into, and I thought I would not make it, but I was approved in second place, I felt immense pride for the course and the university that welcomed me.

I have always had very strong memories of the place where I was born, in Laurito, a province of Salerno in the Southern region of Italy, and of the family that I left there. My identification with [Antonio] Gramsci⁷ began there, and it naturally extended to the question of the popular in Communication. That is my root: the popular.

⁷ Italian linguist, writer, and Marxist philosopher.

An immigrant in Brazil, during the 1950s, 1960s, when they were improving their life, they would first purchase a radio, only later a television, because it was expensive. I bear all this with me, the radio, the the *novela*. I was a fan of *radionovela* because we listened to them a lot at home. We would talk to the neighbors about the day's chapter. I was a reader of *novelas* in magazines, the *fotonovelas*. I followed them, I discussed them, I liked them a lot, and so I reached the *radionovela* and the *telenovela*.

Early in my academic career, I thought of studying Silvio Santos' television, which had this whole question of the popular, of him coming from a humble background and building a great communication company, the only one in the country built based on the savings of popular people, the "*baú da felicidade*." However, as I said before, Professor Ruth Cardoso encouraged me to study radio first and then continue with television. And it was really good for me to start with radio because, when I studied it, I remembered the radio of my childhood and what we listened to at home. From that, my awareness of the need to feel passion for the object of study arose.

Regarding studies in television fiction, it was the same. It all started with the love I have for *telenovelas*. And because from here on I recognize it as a *narrative of the nation* and as a *communicative resource*. When people are talking a lot about a *novela*, as with *Pantanal* (remake, Globo, 2022), or as it happened with *Avenida Brasil* (Globo, 2012), *Vale Tudo* (Globo, 1988,) or *Roque Santeiro* (Globo, 1985), these two concepts of mine you are perfectly understandable. When the themes addressed in a *novela* fit with what a society is living in its daily life, we realize the strength of this *communicative resource* and, if well used, can generate public policies for women, minorities, the environment, health, among others. Of course, it is not the *novela* that will solve these problems, but we observe that, during its 70-year history, relevant themes have been narrated, contributing over and over to society. ■



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