

How Women Are Using Television to Domesticate Globalization: A Case Study on the Reception and Consumption of *Telenovelas* in Senegal

Jean-François Werner

This paper focuses on how Senegalese women receive and consume Latin-American-made *telenovelas*. Description and analysis of this phenomenon are based on data collected in the suburbs of Dakar during the first six months of the year 2002, by means of an ethnographic study which was designed to investigate how *telenovelas* might be playing a role in feminine identity dynamics. On the one hand, the results show that the reception of *telenovelas* occurs essentially inside the households, thus modifying the balance between public and private spheres. They are watched mainly by women and children who meet together at regular intervals, according to a synchronization pattern which is engrained in their daily routines. This domestication of people by *telenovelas* is backed up by a very efficient strategy of communication that makes use of three types of message—oral, visual, and musical—engraved in a sophisticated narrative structure. On the other hand, people domesticate television through a complex reception process which is both collective and active. At the end of it, women are able to intertwine some of the threads picked up in the *telenovelas* within their own daily social fabric to make things change, especially in the realm of gender relationships and parent-children relationships. Moreover, television appears to play a catalytic role in helping women to gain more autonomy in the economic field. In conclusion, *telenovelas* are attracting women because they help them find their way in a fast changing world.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the whole of French-speaking West Africa, the consumption of *telenovelas* is quantitatively very important. Tens of millions of persons, mostly women living in urban areas, have been watching them the whole year round for the last ten years, as *telenovelas* have been progressively taking the lead over European- and US-produced fictional television programs. Senegal is a major example of this phenomenon, as twelve *telenovelas*, nine of which were Brazilian

JEAN-FRANÇOIS WERNER is currently practicing anthropology in West Africa on behalf of the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD). For the last fifteen years, his topic of research has been the conditions of production and the social uses of visual technologies (photography, television, and medical imaging) in contemporary West African societies. E-mail: jean-francois.werner@ird.fr

and three Mexican, have been broadcast since the beginning of the 1990s. It can also be noted for a start that there has been an increase in the number of *telenovelas* that were broadcast simultaneously (only one in 1991, up to three in 2002), and secondly, that there has been a shorter temporal lag between the broadcasting of *telenovelas* in the place of production and in Senegal. For instance, *Isaura*, the first *telenovela* shown in Senegal (in 1991–92) was broadcast fifteen years later than when it had first been seen in Brazil (1977), whereas the *telenovela* entitled *The Tower of Babel* was broadcast in 2002, only two years after it had first been shown in Brazil.

This paper focuses on how African women receive and consume these Latin-American-made *telenovelas*. The description and analysis of this phenomenon are based on data collected in the suburbs of Dakar during the first six months of the year 2002, in an ethnographic study which was designed to test the hypothesis concerning how television in general and *telenovelas* in particular might be playing a role in feminine identity dynamics in a contemporary West African society.¹ Due to their power of attraction over women, and because they are broadcast throughout the world, the *telenovelas* appeared to be an appropriate empirical object for addressing this issue. Moreover, the numerous studies dealing with *telenovelas* production and consumption in non-African societies, especially Latin American ones, open the door to comparative analysis [see Tufté 2000: 21–24, for a review on the subject].

Concerning the theoretical background of this study, it should be stressed that I am not a specialist in the field of television but, on the contrary, a general anthropologist studying in West Africa the condition of production and the social use of various visual technologies, such as photography [Werner 1999, 2001] and medical imaging [Werner 2004]. Consequently, this current study was rooted in a deliberate research strategy that was conceived to investigate how the practices and representations concerning the use of visual technologies in contemporary West African societies are related to each other within a collective “*imaginaire*” (imagination).²

The remainder of this article is divided into three sections. In the first one, the account of the research strategy that was used is followed by a description of the contemporary Senegalese “audio-visual-scape.” Secondly, there is a thorough examination of the way people are domesticated by television as a technological object and as a medium. Thirdly, there is an analysis of how television itself is domesticated by people through an active and collective reception process. In the conclusion, *telenovelas* consumption is related to the fact that women need to adapt themselves to a changing social environment long affected by a harsh economic crisis.

METHODOLOGY AND THE LOCAL AUDIOVISUAL “MEDIASCAPE”

From a methodological point of view, the challenge in this study was to clarify how a particular genre of television program called *telenovela* became engraved in the everyday life of an African population, on the one hand, and to assess the sociological impact that results from watching, talking, and thinking about

telenovelas, on the other. Hence, particular attention was paid to the local practices and discourses which surround *telenovelas* consumption and inscribe them into local life, according to an approach that is strongly linked with what is called "media ethnography" [Tufte 2000: 20–33] and "media anthropology" [Askew and Wilk 2002]. The emphasis placed by these methods on the materiality of communication has led me to consider the physical and sensory properties of the television technology which, by its very form, is able to shape the social context of reception and play a determining role in the decoding of the message [Ginsburg *et al.* 2002: 19].

This study was conducted during the first six months of the year 2002, by applying a threefold fieldwork tactic. First, I watched on a daily basis the different *telenovelas* which were currently being broadcast, in order to obtain detailed knowledge of the storyline, of the individual biographies of the different characters, and of their relationships with each other. Secondly, I practiced participant observation in several households, which involved observing how people behaved in front of their TV sets, and listening to, and recording, what they said before, during and after the broadcasting of *telenovelas*. Thirdly, I conducted qualitative and detailed interviews with a non-representative sample of twenty *telenovelas* viewers. This consisted of 14 women aged between 8 and 70 years, and six men aged between 14 and 62 years, belonging to middle- and lower-class social groups, according to their level of education and socio-economic status.³ While I had planned to interview only women, my first observations in the field made it clear that some men and numerous children were also involved in *telenovelas* watching. This discovery led me to broaden the spectrum of my informants, by including a few men and children.

Simultaneously, with the purpose of acquiring more knowledge about the distribution process, I investigated the way *telenovelas* have been marketed and broadcast in Senegal. This was done through interviews conducted with a few of the main actors on the local media scene: two managers of the national radio and television public service (Radio Télévision du Senegal = RTS), the head of a local survey institute (BDA), and a manager of the Senegalese office of an international advertising agency (McCann Erickson).

In order to contextualize this study within a wider framework, a broad overview of the local audiovisual scene will be given, followed by the ethnographic description of *telenovelas* broadcasting.

THE CONTEMPORARY SENEGALESE "MEDIASCAPE"

When one considers the contemporary Senegalese "mediascape,"⁴ television appears to be the dominant visual medium, as indicated by the increasing number of TV sets. In Dakar, for instance, between the early 1990s and the first years of the 21st century, the overall rate of households possessing television sets went up from 36% to 55%.⁵ It is necessary to stress that this increasing demand for TV sets has not been caused by a sudden increase in wealth (on the contrary, the economic situation of the majority of the population has worsened), but rather reflects the importance given to the consumption of television as a commodity

and a medium by a large majority of the urban population, especially young people and women [Tudesq 1999: 111–112].

This increase in television consumption is the main cause of the dramatic decline one can observe in cinema attendance, especially by women who, up to the end of the 1980s, used to view a lot of Indian movies. The majority of young women watching *telenovelas* have never experienced going to a movie theater and, as a matter of fact, many of these were closed down over the last decade.⁶

If the realization of photographic portraiture by professional photographers is still a social obligation during family rituals, such as baptisms, marriages, and birthdays, and remains a widely used means of recording daily life as well as social events, the private use of video-taping is still limited, mainly because the majority of the population cannot afford to buy video-players.⁷ Incidentally, a remarkable features of the Senegalese “mediascape,” shared by other French-speaking West African countries, is the lack of locally-produced video fiction films, as contrasted with English-speaking countries such as Nigeria [Haynes 2000] or Ghana [Meyer 1999].

Printed media, such as newspaper and fashion magazines, have never been widely consumed by Senegalese women. This is not only due to their relatively high cost but also because only a small part of the feminine population is able to read French [Tudesq 1999: 109]. In Senegal, as is the case in most West African countries, literary culture never became an element of daily life for lower income and poor, uneducated social groups, except for the “picture love-stories” which have been imported from Europe for a long time. The broadcasting of *telenovelas* has been directly responsible for the strong decline in the consumption of these “picture-stories” which used to be “read” even by uneducated women as they were taking advantage of pictures to by-pass the texts associated with them.

In short, the current “mediascape” in Senegal is characterized by two main trends. The first one is the decline in still and silent images, such as picture-stories and magazines, and the triumph of moving and speaking images such as television and video. The second one is the growth of domestic (television, video) or semi-public (Internet, through what is called “cyber-café”) media consumption over public ones, such as the cinema.

TELEVISION PROGRAMS ON OFFER IN DAKAR

Television programs are offered in Dakar by a single public channel (RTS) and two private stations (Canal Horizons and Sokhna FM). RTS reaches 90% of the Dakar urban community (altogether 2.5 million people, a quarter of the overall Senegalese population) and broadcasts over the whole national territory to the most remote places by means of a network of ground transmitters. Created in 1973, RTS has always been state-controlled, and the current ruling power is still seeking to cut the costs of this institution while monitoring the programming range and quality in order to control political and moral boundaries.

The strategy of RTS is to offer a full range of program types, from programs intended to attract a wide public (drama, serials, news, and sports), to more

distinctive ones intended to promote and protect the Senegalese culture, like religious broadcasts, Wolof-speaking dramas, short series, and talk-shows that people appreciate a lot. However, RTS is lacking the financial means to produce this type of program on a large scale, and therefore its program slots are supplied mainly with foreign-made productions.

Besides RTS, two other private hertzian channels are available in Dakar⁸: Canal Horizons is received by 7% of the over-18-year-old metropolitan population, while a local operator called Sokhna FM, which offers low-cost access to a "bouquet" of twelve channels, is received by 5.6% of the same population.⁹

WHAT IS A TELENVELA?

A *telenovela*¹⁰ is a specific television genre, produced in some Latin America countries. Historically, Brazil was the first country to produce *telenovelas*, and it is still by far the most important producer, ahead of such countries as Mexico, Venezuela, Argentina, or Colombia. Globo TV Corporation is the most important producer in Brazil. *Telenovelas* are made by Globo in a place called Projac, where six of them can be shot at the same time, in six different studios [Perreau 1999: 23–24]. Generally *telenovelas* vary from 180 up to 240 episodes, and even more when the ratings are successful.

The first *telenovelas* were produced in Brazil in the early 1950s and, until this day, they have been the most popular fictional television programs in that country.¹¹ Their success has much to do with the fact that the *telenovela* genre has been evolving over the years in order to reflect transformations in Brazilian society. Within the present period, which has been called a "post-realist one" [Tufté 2000: 98], *telenovelas* stage the broad social spectrum of Brazilian society, with its different social types (the industrial manager, the worker, the housewife, etc.), its conflicts, and its lifelike situations (urban violence, homosexuality, corruption, and much else). Although there is room for artistic creativity and subversive agendas to occur in the production process, one must keep in mind that *telenovelas* are commodities produced on an industrial basis, and consequently commercial goals are ultimately determining the shape of these highly profitable products.¹²

For instance, when Silvio Abreu, a well-known Brazilian *telenovela* scriptwriter, wrote the script of *The Tower of Babel* (which was later broadcast in West Africa), he intended to make, in his own words, "a radiography of the present times" in order to alert the public to the violence of contemporary Brazilian society. However, his didactic ambition, which was based upon a realist and critical vision of Sao Paulo society, had to be modified quickly and abruptly because of the sharp decline in audience ratings after the broadcasting of its first chapters. Among other things, the public rejected the realistic way violence was shown, and the fact that a married woman was seduced by another gay woman. Consequently, the writer had to "kill" the most controversial characters off, and to soften the description of their sexual behavior [Perreau 1999: 23–35].

The soft realistic way *telenovelas* deal with cultural differences and controversial issues (as for instance, with homosexuality which is not accepted in a

predominantly Muslim society such as the Senegalese one) is greatly appreciated by RTS managers. They take advantage of the narrative realism of the genre to confront Senegalese people with other lifestyles, and make them open to other cultures: “*Telenovelas* are successful because they deal with social issues that are the same ones African people are facing...What matters is that the social situations described in the *telenovelas* are similar to those the public experiences in its daily life, and complex enough to fit the needs of everyone” [the RTS program manager].

This social concern of *telenovelas* constitutes one of the major differences between them and *soap operas*, despite the fact that social problems are mainly understood in terms of their impact on the personal and domestic spheres, rather than from a socio-political perspective. As a matter of fact, though, *telenovelas* and *soap operas* are constructed in the same serial way and are composed of the same narrative structures, which involve the intertwining of multiple strands, they are two different genres.¹³

The first difference between them is that *telenovelas* are prime-time products while *soap operas* are daytime products. Hence, the target audience of *telenovelas*, which is the whole family, is much broader than for *soap operas*, namely the 18- to 49-year-old women’s group. Another difference is that, unlike *soap operas* which tend to last almost eternally, *telenovelas* last about five to eight months, and come to a definite end after a number of episodes varying from 140 up to 240. Last but not least, *telenovelas* are open works produced through an interactive process between the public and the producing team, as production and broadcasting are almost simultaneous. Consequently, the story can even be changed “in mid-stream” depending on the reactions of the audience which are measured, on a day-to-day basis, through sophisticated instruments [Tufté 2000: 138].

Paradoxically, despite the fact they are literally hand-tailored to suit the desires and expectations of Latin-American audiences, *telenovelas* are able to cross national boundaries worldwide, and are exported to many other parts of the world.¹⁴ Thus, at the end of the 1980s, Globo was selling television fiction, mostly *telenovelas*, to 128 countries worldwide, not only in Latin America and Africa, but also in Asia (Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, China, and India) and Eastern Europe (Russia, Serbia).

TELENOVELAS BROADCASTING IN DAKAR (2001–2002)

In Senegal, RTS is the only channel to broadcast *telenovelas*, a feature which provides some kind of legitimacy to the program. In 2002, during the course of my survey, two to three *telenovelas* were being shown every day, except on weekends, which amounted to between two to four hours of programming every day, accounting from 15% up to 30% of the overall RTS daily flow. On weekdays, during prime-time, a regular schedule was followed. At seven o’clock, a new episode of a *telenovela* called *The Tower of Babel*¹⁵ was broadcast. It was followed by advertising spots and then by the Wolof-speaking news at seven-thirty. Then, at eight o’clock, a new chapter of a *telenovela* called *Catalina and Sebastian*¹⁶ was broadcast. It was followed, at eight-thirty, by the French language news, then

more advertising spots, and then by the late evening programs. Furthermore, two episodes of a Brazilian *telenovela* entitled *Sublime Lie*¹⁷ were successively broadcast twice a week, on Mondays and Fridays, late at night.

According to a survey conducted by BDA in February 2002 at the request of the RTS management, *telenovelas* rated second only to French language news (66.5%), as far as the audience rating was concerned. The same survey revealed that women were representing up to 90% of their public, and that most of them were between 18 and 24 years old [BDA 2002].

From a financial point of view, *telenovelas* appeal to Senegalese broadcasters because they are not expensive to purchase; a 26-minute episode costs only 380 euros, while at the same time they suit the needs of advertisers by attracting large audiences in front of their TV sets on a regular basis. Thus they are usually readily sponsored by local advertisement agencies which are ready to pay as much as 685 euros for one episode, allowing national channels to receive a quick return on their investment. For instance, the broadcasting of *Catalina and Sebastian* and *Sublime Lie*¹⁸ have been sponsored from beginning to end by the international firm Colgate-Palmolive, in order to promote some widely used domestic products such as culinary items or cleansers. It should be stressed here that the fact television images are perceived by onlookers as visual proof of what is happening in the phenomenological sphere is explicitly acknowledged and used by people working in the field of advertising, even if they do not know how it works, in order to promote and sell all types of goods.

To understand the current popular success of *telenovelas* in Senegal, one has to look back to the past, to the first *telenovela* ever shown in Senegal, a historical one entitled *Isaura*. This latter was portraying, in a relatively mild way, "masters" and "slaves" relationships inside a 19th century Brazilian sugar plantation. The extraordinary success the series encountered must be considered in relationship to the collective trauma caused by the previous broadcasting of the US-produced *Roots* (entitled *Kinte Kinta* in Senegal), at the beginning of the 1980s. I was told by informants that the broadcasting of this series had to be interrupted by RTS because people were so emotionally disturbed by the violence shown on the screen that white people were being manhandled in Dakar. From this point of view, one can suppose that the positive reception of *Isaura* by the Senegalese public was due to the fact that it was taking care of a sore wound caused by *Roots*, by offering a version of the story that was more respectful of people's feelings.

Moreover, from a diachronic point of view, *telenovelas* have not been the only television programs to have an impact on the collective Senegalese imagination (in the sense of "imaginaire"). For instance, a US-New-Zealand series entitled *Xena, the Warrior Woman* that was broadcast in the 1990s enjoyed a tremendous success with young women and children. This brave and aggressive female character, who was able to compete with men and to beat them up repeatedly, might have opened the way for the reception of strong and independent feminine characters in later *telenovelas*.

In short, the way Senegalese publics are perceiving and receiving television programs stems from a socio-historical collective construction in which different "visual traditions are entangled" [Wendl 2001], or different "visual regimes are overlapping each other" [Pinney 1997]. In other words, Senegalese women give

meaning to *telenovelas* through the filter of a collective imagination (in the sense of “*imaginaire*”) that has been shaped not only by previous television program broadcasting but also by Indian movies made in “Bollywood,” advertising clips, printed picture-stories, women’s magazines, and locally produced video musical clips [Schulz 2001].

THE DOMESTICATION OF PEOPLE BY TELEVISION

The process through which television programs are received by Senegalese people is a complex one, and can be related to a dialectical domestication process. On the one hand, people themselves are literally domesticated by television (*i.e.*, they are abstracted from the public space and kept at home to watch TV programs). On the other hand, television itself is domesticated and appropriated by people the same way a wild animal might be accustomed to live under the care of man and be exploited in some way or another.

Here domestication refers to the capacity of a social group (a household, a family) to appropriate technological artifacts into its own culture, its own spaces and times, its own aesthetics, and its own functioning. In other words, it means to incorporate them into the very structure of their everyday life, through a struggle for the control of its meaning and of its potency [Silverstone 1994: 98].

In order to understand this process of domestication of people by television, I shall distinguish in the following pages between television as a technological object and television as a medium, following the theoretical frame elaborated by Silverstone [1994: 83]. Through this double articulation, the message is not determined only by technology, but rather is constructed within the social circumstances under which it is both produced and received.

THE DOMESTICATION OF PEOPLE BY TELEVISION AS A TECHNOLOGICAL OBJECT

In Dakar, most people prefer to watch television at home, which involves all the connotations tied to a place perceived and experienced on a daily basis as an important source of individual and collective identities. In these conditions, the domestication process of people by television as an object relies upon ordering of the domestic space, and time organization of daily life.

Spatial Ordering of the Domestic Space

As there is usually only one TV per household, that TV as an object is placed in the living room (wherever there is one), or in the bedroom if the household has only one room to live in [Figures 1 and 2].

The living room (it is called *sâl* in Wolof,¹⁹ a term coming from the French *salle*) is furnished with what is called commonly a *salon*, a set of furniture that falls into the third rank of household equipment, after radio and television [Gomez 2000: 20–21]. It usually includes the following furniture items: one couch, two



Figure 1 Bedroom of the X household head in South Golf, a suburb of Dakar. There is no sal in this house, where two TV sets are functioning. The household head is a retired man with a small pension. His wife likes watching uncomplicated and tearful Mexican telenovelas. (Photo © Werner, 2003.)

armchairs and one glass-windowed closet where small decorative objects are exhibited alongside photographic portraits of the family members [Figures 3 and 4]. Another visual medium, the family photographic album, is usually kept in the living room and will be put into the hands of a visitor as a way of introducing him or her to the household composition and social status. The floor of this room is usually covered with a carpet, and curtains are hung along the walls and the openings, thus giving this space an atmosphere of luxury and leisure that distinguishes it from the rest of the domestic area. This separation from the outside world is enforced by the use of a ventilator and artificial lights which make this room a place relatively far away from the outside world's climate and the day and night cycle.

Inserted between the outside world and the intimate domestic space, the living room has many functions. It is the place dedicated to the reception of strangers (guests and visitors) and at the same time it is a place where the household members might gather at regular intervals in order to share pleasurable moments (like, for instance, drinking tea together), and augment the ties between them. It functions also as the showcase of the household's social status, and from this

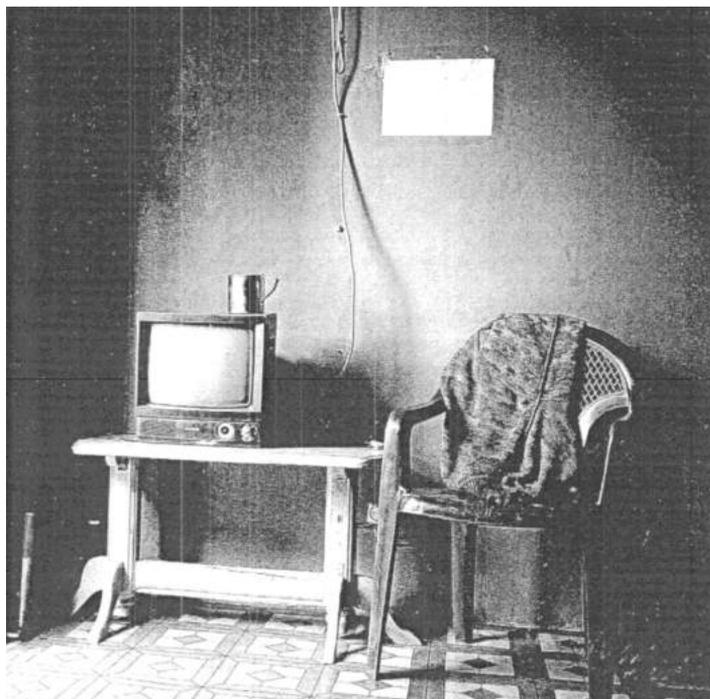


Figure 2 Another bedroom in the X household house, in South Golf, a suburb of Dakar. It is occupied by one of the daughters of the household head, her husband and their children. Unlike her mother, this woman enjoys watching sophisticated Brazilian telenovelas. (Photo © Werner, 2003.)

viewpoint owning a TV set is a social obligation that even reluctant household heads cannot escape from because of the pressure they are subjected to by their dependents. As a matter of fact, members of the household would rather watch television at home than in some neighbors' house, an experience which is described as humiliating by informants unless the people in question are close friends.

Hence, people gathering in front of the TV sets to watch *telenovelas* mainly belong to the same household: old or young women, a few grown-up men, teenagers (not only girls, but also boys who take advantage of this opportunity to enter into relationships with them), and about every child living in the house, infants included. In these conditions, the viewers of *telenovelas*, surrounded by relatives and friends, and temporarily relieved from the burden of social struggle, might take advantage of the security and the intimacy of the domestic environment to feel and express emotions, feelings and opinions in a way which fits very well with the Wolof claim for modest behavior (*sutura*).

Altogether, there might be anything from a handful of persons up to thirty and more watching *telenovelas*, depending on the socio-economic status of the household, the poorest ones being the more crowded with children and youngsters. Lastly, television reception implies the immobility of the bodies of the viewers



Figure 3 Living room, or sal, of the Z family house located in a suburb of Dakar. The household head is a trader belonging to the Murid brotherhood, as two portraits of the brotherhood heads hanging on the wall above the TV set testify. Women and young girls in this house are regular telenovelas watchers. (Photo © Werner, 2003.)



Figure 4 Living room of the Y family home located in a suburb of Dakar. The household head is a well-to-do businessman. Besides telenovelas, his wife is attracted by all kinds of television programs. She has numerous channels to watch through a local private network offering a bouquet. (Photo © Werner, 2003.)



Figure 5 Family consumption of a telenovela in a poor household located in the suburbs of Dakar. (Photo © Werner, 2002.)

for quite long periods and the subsequent use of armchairs, chairs and other kinds of seating by elders and higher social status persons, while children and teenagers sit on the floor [Figures 5 and 6].

Depending on the authority of the adults who are present, the reception of the *telenovelas* might be more or less disturbed by noises (children crying or shouting) or hubbub. While in some houses it is very quiet, in others it is scarcely possible to hear anything of what is being said by the actors. This noisy environment associated with poor technical conditions of reception, which make pictures and sound sometimes barely perceptible for the ethnographer, does not prevent the autochthonous viewers from understanding what is happening on the screen and keeping track of the storyline—by mobilizing the rest of the audience, if necessary.



Figure 6 Family consumption of a Senegalese short Wolof-speaking series inside the same poor household as in Figure 5. (Photo © Werner, 2002.)

The fact that children are accustomed at a very early age (infants are literally raised in front of TV sets) to watch television in the company of their mothers and other family members has been one of the main discoveries of this investigation. This situation means that watching TV is becoming more and more customary for children, not only in Senegal but in other West African societies, and might be considered, as I shall explain further on, an essential vehicle of communication between mothers and children.

Time Organization of the Household

Time organization of the household relative to *telenovelas* broadcasting is a dialectical one. On the one hand, it depends on the ability of RTS to broadcast the different programs following a schedule that is set according to the availability of the different audiences.²⁰ On the other hand, the individuals are organizing their activities to synchronize their availability with the broadcasting of their favorite programs.

In Dakar, *telenovelas* are broadcast every day according to a pattern that allows people to watch them twice. The first rendez-vous with *telenovelas* is scheduled at the beginning of the afternoon (between two and four P.M.), when the two

episodes which have been broadcast the previous evening are shown again. Then the following chapters are broadcast in the evening, during prime-time, between seven and nine P.M. Thus somebody who would be wanting to watch only *telenovelas* could spend at least two hours a day watching TV. However, usually people are watching other programs as well and, in the end, they spend quite a large amount of time in front of their TV sets. While most of my informants were spending from three to nine hours a day watching TV, some well-to-do women, idle and bored with access to channels other than RTS (Canal Horizons or Sokhna FM), could spend over nine hours a day watching.

Among the family members staying at home most of the time (young or older women, or young children not yet going to school), the presence of television introduces some regularity and self-control within a time schedule organized in a rather loose way around domestic tasks (cooking lunch and dinner, going to the market, washing and ironing clothes, taking care of children) which are performed by women according to a work division between genders that is still prevalent in the Senegalese society. On a day-to-day basis, except for tasks which can be performed while watching television (like breastfeeding, ironing, or plaiting hair), women manage to take care of the domestic tasks before or after *telenovelas* broadcasting periods. As a result, household members are meeting together every day, at regular intervals, according to a pattern of synchronization which is set and engrained in their daily routines and might last for years.

Last but not least, the fact that *telenovelas* are broadcast daily, and for quite long periods, is a feature that strengthens their power of attraction and favors the temporal structure of the daily life of the household. For instance, the broadcasting of a *telenovela* which might number as many as 240 chapters can last up to fourteen months. Once it is over, another *telenovela* will appear in a seemingly endless flow of narratives and moving pictures. Thus day after day viewers acquire a deep knowledge of the different characters, of their personal histories and their entangled relationships, in such a way that they might become as close as relatives. This phenomenon is enhanced by the fact that the same actors, their voices dubbed by the same people, might appear again and again in different *telenovelas*.

To sum up, this ordering of space and time results in a social fragmentation of the population, which is no longer based on a collective and public order (as in the case with religious celebrations, family rituals or movie watching), but on a private and domestic one. However, unlike Latin American countries where men and women watch *telenovelas* together, in Senegal their consumption is mainly a women's activity.

THE DOMESTICATION OF PEOPLE BY TELEVISION AS A MEDIUM

If television has found its place in the house and if people are gathering in front of it on a regular basis, this is not only because of the aesthetic qualities of this technological object or because it is a useful and up-to-date social-status indicator, but more crucially because TV as a medium is able to deliver instructive as well as very pleasurable messages.

From this point of view, the success encountered by *telenovelas* around the world appears to rest on a universally appealing fairytale-like structure.

All *telenovelas* are structured the same way. In the first episodes, the characters are established in a stable pattern of life, when an event occurs which breaks down this balance. In the central part, the action develops and the narrative proceeds slowly between primary and secondary plots towards reparation through numerous trials and hardships. In the end, a new balance is reached and harmony restored: truth will triumph over lies, the bad characters will be punished and the good ones rewarded. Along the way, the different hypotheses elaborated by the viewers will or will not be validated and at the end of the broadcast all the questions will have been answered, all the uncertainties will have been dissolved, and all disorder will have been definitively straightened out.

Equally important to the attraction of *telenovelas* for women is their strong melodramatic dimension, through their focus on the emotionally laden interpersonal domestic world, a feature which furthers a “dramatization of consciousness” among viewers, in the sense that they are led by television to see their daily lives as drama [Abu-Lughod 2002: 118]. Furthermore, in a society like the Senegalese one where the individuals are still embedded in kin and family, this “emotionalization of the quotidian world” might favor the emergence of a more individualized subject through the enforcement of his/her feelings and emotions, and the subsequent development of a rich and conflicting inner life [Abu-Lughod 2002: 117–122].

To illustrate the complexity of the narrative structure of *telenovelas*, I shall underline the following points borrowed from an analysis made by Vink [1998] cited by Barker [1997: 89] of twenty-two Brazilian *telenovelas* which were broadcast between 1971 and 1987:

- The average *telenovela* stages numerous (from thirty up to forty) diverse characters whose itineraries are intertwined like multiple strands in a fabric;
- While good and evil characters retain an influence, the current tendency is to question this manichean mode of representation in search of a more realistic representation, with the result that contradictory textual meanings are available to viewers and might be activated or not by the audience;
- If the central discourse of *telenovelas* concerns interpersonal relationships, it has not prevented the scriptwriters from incorporating more social themes, although the depth of real poverty in Brazil is not shown and class is depicted as a question of consumption rather than one of place and status in the production process.

In short, *telenovelas* are very complex narratives in terms of the elaborate sets of relationships between characters, the interweaving of multiple and diverse stories and the *staccato* narrative style which requires considerable skill to understand [Barker 1997: 121]. Their worldwide success rests on a very efficient strategy of communication, using three types of message: oral, visual and musical.

Oral Discursive Communication

This is based mainly upon dialogues between characters that were originally speaking Brazilian Portuguese. In a second phase, these oral exchanges are

translated into French (or other languages), and the characters are dubbed, insofar as most of the informants doubted the characters were speaking French, albeit they were not sure of what language was spoken originally (whether English, Spanish, or “Brazilian”). It should be stressed that dubbing, which is a technique frequently used in the audiovisual industry, has the effect of blurring the cultural characteristics of the television programs, making them linguistically ambiguous commodities.

Nevertheless, the French language used in *telenovelas* is quite different from classical French as taught in the Senegalese school system²¹; it is sometimes extremely colloquial and other times, on the contrary, very sophisticated, with cultural references which are not known in contemporary Senegalese culture. I am referring here to expressions related to classical Greek culture (“the Sword of Damocles”) or ancient European history (“machiavellian”), while a term like “share,” belonging to contemporary financial vocabulary, was understood by a majority of educated young people. Inside these limits, what is perceived and understood by educated people might be translated on the spot into Wolof or another national language for the other viewers, especially older people. On this occasion, one observes that relationships inside the familial group might be significantly altered as the transmission of knowledge is going from the younger toward the older. Consequently some individuals, especially young children, take advantage of their skills in the reception of *telenovelas* to negotiate a new place inside the group.

However, this limited understanding of what is said by the characters does not prevent people, even uneducated ones, from understanding what is going on. For instance, Awa (a sixty-year-old woman, uneducated and speaking only Wolof) enjoys watching *telenovelas* and does so on a regular basis. When she does not understand what is going on, she asks her educated daughters to make a quick translation or explain it to her. Nevertheless, despite this lack of understanding of what is said on the screen, she has a very good knowledge of the numerous characters, of their social identities and individual stories, and of the kind of relationships they have with one another. The fact that *telenovelas* use a narrative form centered on family dynamics—involving kinship, marriages, divorces, arguments, departures, thwarted matches, and so on—which reflect the way she is representing and telling of her own social relationships, makes her a highly competent *telenovela* consumer. Moreover, she also relies heavily on the visual messages she perceives in order to understand the meaning of what is staged on the screen.

Visual Communication

A review of literature on television studies gives prominence to the fact that the visual side of television consumption has not yet been fully taken into consideration by researchers who, most of the time, have studied it from the narrative side, using terms like “narrative forms,” “texts,” and “readers” to talk about television programs and people receiving them. By considering images like docile and obedient servants of the narrative in which they are embedded, the studies miss the point of their relative autonomy with regard to language.

What is at stake here is the acknowledgment of the intrinsic polysemic nature of the image in the sense that, below the perceived signifiers, there is a plurality of floating signified (“*Une chaîne flottante de signifiés*” [Barthes 1964: 44–45]) that the viewer might decide either to select or to discard. Moreover, while the linguistic message, as well as the structural form given to the narrative by the authors, are intended to anchor or guide the interpretation of the viewers in some predetermined way, the spectator might use the gap existing between images and text to stand aloof from the latter [Missika and Wolton 1983: 172].

Before going further, it must be stressed that all my informants were mastering the codes of cinematographic narrative such as, for instance, the flash-back which is widely used in *telenovelas*. The images are blurred in a special way in order to make viewers understand that what is actually going on happened, in fact, sometime in the past. Another example of such codes is the inner monologs delivered by characters who think aloud without moving their lips, while the sound of their voices is slightly altered in a distinctive way.

Telenovelas' visual communication relies heavily on the expression of emotions (anger, joy, sadness, sorrow, pain) which are transmitted to the public through the repeated use of close-ups on the faces of the actors. Generally speaking, the body of the actors is used to convey meaning through attitudes, gestures, facial mimicry and weeping. According to Modleski [1982, cited by Abu-Lughod 2002: 117], this type of visual communication exercises women viewers' abilities to read how close relatives are feeling, in order to anticipate their needs and desires.

To be successful, this type of communication must use codes people are acquainted with, which is not always the case for the Senegalese viewing public. For instance, while signs indicating that the characters are Catholic (making the sign of the cross, going to church, having a crucifix hanging on the wall) were perceived without difficulty by my informants, because people in Senegal are accustomed to Catholic rituals (church services, prayers, hymns, pilgrimages), other visual messages were misunderstood or not perceived at all. This was the case, for instance, when not one of the informants was able to decipher the meaning of the particular gesture (hands miming horns above the brow) used to signify somebody is a cuckold.

Beside the central role played by the human body, visual communication relies also on the repetitive showing of a small number of places, whether they are domestic or professional (medical settings), public (churches, beaches) or private, or related to consumption activities (commercial centers) or legal matters (police station or jailhouse). These are functioning as cartographic landmarks and also as indicators of class, with the rich living in big houses with swimming pools while the working-class people live in houses decorated according to a kitsch aesthetic, which is largely shared by Senegalese female *telenovela* watchers [Figures 7 and 8].

Seemingly, the visual impact of *telenovelas* can be observed through their influence on women's fashion. For instance, during my investigation a great number of young women were wearing a garment, a one-strap blouse leaving one shoulder uncovered, which was made by local tailors according to an item created by a female character playing the role of a successful Rio de Janeiro fashion designer in the *telenovela Sublime Lie* [Figure 9]. Besides the methodological usefulness of a phenomenon that provides the researcher with a visual confirmation



Figure 7 Detailed view of the decoration of the living room of the Y family in Guédiawaye. (Photo © Werner, 2003.)



Figure 8 Detailed view of the decoration of the living room of the Z family in Guédiawaye. (Photo © Werner, 2003.)

of the importance of the identification processes related to a particular *telenovela* these transformations of the corporeal appearance are playing a central role in the shaping and preservation of individual identities in a society where the appearance is not considered as something incidental but rather as expressing the intimate and true self.

Musical Communication

Brazilian music, which is much appreciated by Senegalese people for its rhythmic qualities, is not only playing an important role in *telenovelas* as an entertaining



Figure 9 Garment created by a local Senegalese tailor, according to an item designed by a female character from the telenovela *Sublime Lie*. (Photo © Werner, 2002.)

device or a musical background but also as a means to emphasize what some character is doing or saying, a way to stress that something important is happening, in case the spectators were not aware of what was actually going on on the screen.

In the end, *telenovela* tactics of communication are based mainly on redundancy. Oral messages associated with visual messages are repeated again and again and underlined from time to time by musical signals, thus causing the *telenovela* action to unfold in a very slow and repetitive way, one that educated people consider boring²² but which allows uneducated people to follow the different lines of the plot and to understand the ups and downs of the characters' trajectories. The fact that each *telenovela* episode is broadcast twice by RTS reinforces these tactics of communication, and allows uneducated people (especially older women and young children) full access to this kind of program. In this sense, *telenovelas* appear to be efficient mass-cultural products able to attract crowds of hundreds of millions of people around the world, and as such they represent a challenge for anthropologists trying to understand the cultural side of the globalization process.

Moreover, the accessibility of *telenovelas* is also reinforced by a relative trans-cultural proximity, as far as the urban feminine Senegalese public is concerned. As a matter of fact, there are numerous common elements in the representation that *telenovelas* are giving of Brazilian society and the representation Senegalese women have of their social roles in their own society.

There are five important stereotypical representations here, covering various aspects of society and social relationships. The first is that women are seen as being accountable for keeping the social order, notably because they are invested with the responsibility of respecting the kinship rules (a case of exchanged babies is a recurrent theme in *telenovelas*) while, at the same time, they might disrupt it, from being unable to control their sexual drives. The second one is that, if men have a dominant situation in the social, economic and religious spheres, women are more powerful in the realm of desires and feelings in which men appear to be weak and defenseless when they are confronted with the powerful attraction of women and their seductive tricks. The third one relates to the way relationships between women waiver from solidarity and friendship to rivalry (*kujje*), mixed with feelings of jealousy (*fiiir*), envy (*iñaan*), or distrust (*ñaaaw jort*). The fourth one concerns the functioning of a hybrid and complex society in which a modern and progressive urban culture is rooted in a traditional and backward rural culture, and in which the market economy is challenged by gift-based, socially-bound economic exchange. The last one concerns the organization of the overall society based on the naturalization of a hierarchical social order in which social inequalities are taken for granted, while frequent references to a transcendental religious order give meaning to the hardships people are repeatedly faced with.

To emphasize this point, it should be stressed that the Senegalese society has in common with its Brazilian counterpart being a society in which individuals are negotiating their way toward more autonomy through social relationships that are based mainly on kinship-oriented networks. I am referring here to these individuals who "build up their own life histories, through a succession of compromises, and hybrid creation," according to this "individualization without

individualism" process that has been masterly described, for contemporary West African societies, by Marie *et al.* [1997: 411–415].

THE DOMESTICATION OF TELEVISION BY PEOPLE

If the preceding pages have been concerned exclusively with the issue of domestication of people by television, it should not be forgotten that this is a two-sided process and that people are domesticating television as much as it is domesticating them. It has already been seen what kind of people are gathering in front of the TV sets to watch, and where and when they do it. Now, the issue at stake is how these small family-centered social groups are producing their own meaning out of a product imposed by a dominant economic and technological order.

Telenovelas, like any other television program received and consumed in West Africa, acquire cultural and social relevance through a reception process which might be described as collective and active. Whereas there is no African specificity to this feature, as the active involvement of the audiences is one of the main findings of *telenovelas* reception studies across the world, the frame of reference in which these interpretations occur is tightly associated with the way Senegalese people relate with other people and especially non-African ones.

Indeed, it was surprising to discover that informants were classifying *telenovela* characters as *tubab*—a term which has been used for centuries in West Africa to name white-skinned people of European origin—despite the fact that some of them were evidently the result of black and white cross-breeding, and a few of them looked definitely black.²³ Hence, in order to define these strange Others with whom they have no other relationship than a visually mediated one, the *tubab* category has been given a broader meaning. It does not refer so much to the predominantly white color of the skin of the characters but rather to the fact that they display all the signs associated with an occidental way of life based on economic and technological development, personal freedom of choice, social mobility and consumption as the only one paved route to happiness.

Primary "On the Spot" Interpretation

A first interpretation of the unfolding of the plot and of the meanings of what the different characters do and say on the screen is made, on the spot, by adult viewers (mainly women) who express in loud voices their feelings and emotions, exchange information about the meaning of a word or a gesture, take one character's side against another (a common stand in the Wolof culture, designated by the term *faale*), and make lapidary statements about the behavior or personality of a given character. A few examples of these can be given here:

- "Dafa dof!" ("He or she is crazy!"), about a woman who behaves without any decency because she is passionately in love with a man;
- "Dafa reew!" ("He or she is impolite and/or behaves in a non-conformist way!" about a rich woman handling a servant roughly;

- “*Dafa ñak fayda!*” (“He is shameless!”), about a weak man who lets himself be fooled by women;
- “*Dafa yambaare!*” (“She is a wimp!”), about a woman who does not fight back when a rival comes to provoke her at home;
- “*Cage lê!*” (“She is behaving like a whore!”), to speak about a woman who is chasing men and having numerous love affairs.

These abrupt and short statements are made in front of children and youngsters who do not lose a word of what is exchanged, insofar that the transmission of cultural values and social norms from the older generation to the younger occurs at least partially through the channel of television. This latter is used by parents as a ready-made pedagogic tool, a collection of stories and anecdotes easily available to give moral lectures and provide youngsters with on-the-spot analysis of what is normal and deviant social behavior.

Secondary Interpretation or Interpretation Delayed through Gossip

This first set of interpretations is completed during the temporal interval which lies between the broadcasting of two successive episodes of a *telenovela* by discussions which take place not only inside the household (*kër*) between members of the family but also outside, whether in the close neighborhood (*koiin*), at school (and it might involve boys and girls), at the marketplace (between sellers and customers), or at work (in factories and offices). This gossip about the program is concerned with the examination of the latest developments of the plot, the meaning of the behavior and actions of the different characters, of their motivations, feelings, and strategies. During these conversations people are expressing personal opinions and/or hypotheses concerning the causes of a particular event or the nature of the secrets hidden by some characters, or about what might happen in the following episodes.

Since TV talk relates to a commodity that is consumed by people of different ages, social conditions and genders, it allows them to leave the socially marked out paths of favored relationships between *moroom* (people of the same age-class and gender) and explore new ways of social exchange between girls and boys, between parents and children. For instance, this young twenty-six-year-old woman, unmarried and educated, appreciates watching *telenovelas* not only because they are entertaining but also because she is taking advantage of them to talk about topics, like love feelings, either with a man or with her own father, something she would not have dared to do otherwise.

Thus *telenovela* reception gives birth to a flow of various interpretations, on the collective as well as the individual level, which allow people to negotiate new relationships with the group they belong to by getting the opportunity to express a personal opinion. For *telenovelas* offer such a large number and diversity of characters with whom to identify that everyone has the chance to have an opinion of his/her own—“*ken ku nekk dey indi sa xalaat ci film yi*” as an informant told me—and still share it with the group. Ultimately, nothing really matters, because all this talk is only a way of playing at the limits between fantasy and reality,

a most pleasurable experience from which people might withdraw anytime they want. Thus *telenovelas* offer a space where young family members are allowed some freedom of speech, a feature that is noticeable in a society where elders still maintain a tight control over the ideas and behavior of younger people (or at least are trying to). In other words, TV talk is a crucial forum for experimentation with identities, especially among the young.

Consequently, a new kind of orality is being created which has powerful implications as it shifts the basic balance of communication, between oral and printed uses of language, in favor of the former. These collective practices and discourses which surround visual media, like cinema and television, have been observed in many countries and cultures around the world [Tufté 2000; Hann 2002; Kulick and Willson 2002; Mankekar 2002], to the extent that the solitary consumption of television programs which can be observed in North American and European societies might well be the exception and not the rule.

The Screening or "Poaching"²⁴ Process

Emotional involvement and critical awareness are not exclusive categories, and as several informants told me, "There are things that I take, and there are things that I don't take!"

In fact, between the different stances that might be adopted by the viewers, from a dominated position where the viewer confuses the program with reality to an oppositional stance where the viewer maintains a critical distance from the program, most informants adopted a negotiated position through which they did not dispute the meaning of the program, but rather interpreted and adapted it in the light of their own experience and interest. As was noted by Wilk [2002: 289–290], "this 'pragmatic' or 'realistic' stance allows the viewers to relate the events in the program to their own lives . . . [in such a way that] . . . they are willing to identify with some things and reject others in a creative process of engaged participation."

During this interpretative process, the *telenovela* is taken to pieces, like a fabric being undone, and its basic elements are screened by viewers in such a way that, while some elements are retained and recycled by women to make social relationships change in their close environment, other ones are discarded because they are morally forbidden or socially unacceptable. Phrases used to express these latter ideas include: "It's not good for us!" ("*Baaxul!*"), "It's sinful!" ("*Aram lé!*"), or "It's not in accordance with our traditions!" ("*Bokkul ci suñu coosaan!*"). Among the behaviors that are rejected because they are not compatible with Senegalese social norms and values are all those that might blur the boundaries between generations and genders like, for instance, exchanging newly-born babies. Here the effect of *telenovelas* is to reinforce local identities through a sharper awareness of the differences between "Us" (defined as Senegalese, African, Muslim, Poor) and "Them" (referred to as *tubab*, Christian, Rich).

People watching *telenovelas* are aware that, while there is only one humanity which experiences the same basic emotions and feelings, there are also differences between cultures. They might sometimes challenge them, but without hurting their beliefs or values, because as viewers they are not directly involved in

what is performed on the screen. For instance, they might accept the representation of homosexual relationships on the screen, which Senegalese people acknowledge as something normal according to *tubabs'* sexual ways, but the same people will not tolerate this behavior in a relative or a neighbor because "it is not the way of African (or Muslim) people!"

As for the elements which might be retained and collectively discussed and eventually applied in the lives of *telenovela* consumers, they are, among others, the consideration parents display toward their children, and the straightforward way they speak to them about issues like sexuality, love feelings, or drug consumption. Also, the fact that female characters are able to tell men what they think "because they have more legal rights," or the fact that there is no violence, at least physically speaking, exerted by men on women in *telenovelas*, make women think a lot about their rights in a society where violent behavior is still a common feature within the familial group, whether between the spouses or between parents and children.

In short, through the different stages of this interpretative process women are able to make a comparison between what they are experiencing in their everyday lives and what they see on the television screen, in such a way that it might play a catalytic role in their identity constructions, either by reinforcing their current identity or by making it change in some way or other. In other words, *telenovela* watching contributes to making women think about their way of living as something that is neither inevitable nor necessary.

Telenovelas' Modus Operandi

The results of this study can be read in two different ways, according to the level of observation chosen.

From a micro-sociological point of view, this small-scale ethnographic study supports the common findings about the important role *telenovelas* play in identity processes, by providing consumers with cultural material they might use to give some meaning to the social changes they are facing. This interpretation means that the domestic place should no longer be seen as a bounded area but rather as a space of interaction in which local identities are constructed out of all the material and symbolic resources at hand, including foreign media products; which are then subjected to a process of "indigenization" [Miller 1992: 164–165, quoted in Strelitz 2004: 639].

From this point of view, watching *telenovelas* might not only give women ideas (referred to in Dakar by the use of the term "*science*" borrowed from French), but also more courage ("*fit'*") to try to change things in their own lives, especially in the area of gender relationships which is one of the main issues that *telenovelas* are dealing with. For instance, a recurrent theme of the *telenovela* is the opposition between true, genuine and disinterested love on one side and false, treacherous and selfish love (*i.e.*, motivated only by material interests, on the other). These findings can be interpreted in different ways according to the social status of women.

On the one hand, our observations suggest that this issue makes young, unmarried women think and converse a lot in a society where family-planned

marriages are still common. Watching *telenovelas* might contribute to giving them the strength and courage to claim their right to love and marry the person they want, even if it means confronting their relatives, with little chance of success, given their economic and social dependence.

On the other hand, they show that married or divorced women have a more pragmatic—or “materialistic,” in their own words—approach towards their relationships with their husbands or boyfriends. They are rather taking advantage of what they can learn from *telenovelas* to claim more intimacy and tenderness from a husband or boyfriend and to gain some freedom of speech about sexuality and/or feelings, two matters that have been placed “off-limits” in a culture impregnated with modesty (*kersa*) and shame (*rus*).

Nevertheless, these interpretations should not be taken for granted, as it is necessary to distinguish between what can be said and done in front of the TV screen by watchers and how they might act afterwards in real life. For instance, the same women who are emotionally carried away and cry their eyes out during *telenovelas* broadcasting might behave quite hard-heartedly five minutes later with their husbands or boyfriends. As one female informant commented openly about a young male character deeply in love with a woman, “If a man ever loved me that way, I would make him suffer a lot!”

However, from a macro-sociological point of view, when one considers the results of this study by taking into consideration the way the relationships between genders are structured inside Senegalese society, the social impact of *telenovela* consumption is far from being obvious. Thus, for instance, the desire expressed by women for more freedom of choice in the marriage sphere is hindered by their economic dependence on men: a situation which is unlikely to end in the near future in Senegal, as women are still less educated than men and as their overall employment rate is very low. In the same way, the claim of young women for more sexual freedom, in a society where the use of contraceptive methods is banned by their mothers (because it is associated with sexually deviant behavior), results in out-of-wedlock pregnancies which might ruin their own lives and their children’s. As for the claim that true and disinterested love is based on mutual trustful relationships between men and women, it does not fit at all with the conflictive conception of gender relationships prevailing in a society in which girls are taught by their mothers, grandmothers and maternal aunts never to trust men.

The discrepancy between these two interpretations stems from the methodological weakness of a small-scale qualitative study that was concerned, and only during a short span of time, with a limited number of informants. Moreover, because this study was conducted in the big city of Dakar with long-time urbanized people, the results cannot be held as representative of the majority of the Senegalese population, which lives mainly in small towns or villages. Consequently, even if our findings are congruent with most of the quantitative and qualitative results coming from other studies, there is obviously a need for further research in the field of *telenovelas* reception in Africa.

In conclusion, there is an increasing gap between the slow pace of the evolution of the overall social structure and the much quicker pace women, and to a lesser extent men, are changing, at an individual level, through individualization

processes which are both strengthened and oriented ideologically by *telenovela* watching. This situation results in tensions and conflicts between people and generations, the outcome of which is uncertain but which might result in a conservative reaction and a tighter control over television broadcasting from Islamic pressure groups. This is the main reason why inside the intimacy of their houses women undo the fabric of the *telenovelas*, pick up some threads, and intertwine them discreetly and quietly into the social fabric they weave day after day, hence making the boundaries between genders and between generations change almost unnoticeably.

Women also take advantage of *telenovelas* to gain more autonomy in the economic field, as the economic crisis, which has been affecting Senegalese society for the last twenty years, makes people feel uncertain about their future. In these conditions, acquiring personal autonomy is not a luxury but a vital necessity, for women know very well that marriage does not guarantee them a safe future, since matrimonial instability here is high (due to divorce, repudiation, or death), and even if their marriage is holding together it does not prevent their husbands from losing their jobs and staying unemployed for a long time.

In other words, women are attracted by *telenovelas* not only because of the pleasure they get in watching them but, more significantly, because they meet their expectations for new ideas and conceptions which might help them to find their way in a fast-changing world. By opening up a stage on which are represented the problems of people who are, at the same time, close and far away from them, *telenovelas* offer Senegalese women interpretative resources which allow them to fight their way more efficaciously through those social and economic battlefields that the big African cities are.

From this point of view, the overarching significance of *telenovelas* as global cultural commodities lies in the fact that they bring some alleviation to people who are confronted with an obligation to construct and deconstruct their identities in an endless process which, contrary to the anthropological dominant *doxa* that conceives it as a gift from modernity, might rather be the intolerable burden of the post-modern Sisyphus.

NOTES

1. I am particularly grateful to Tobias Wendl, Margaret Kostic, Mactar Sylla, and Abdoulaye Ann for their precious help.
2. In English there is only one word, *imagination*, to translate the two French words *imaginaire* and *imagination*. In French, *Imaginaire* concerns rather the collective dimension of the imagination, while *imagination* refers to an individual activity.
3. Most of my informants were selected from people I knew from a previous field study and therefore I had a sound knowledge of their individual biographies and social backgrounds.
4. Borrowed from Appadurai [1996: 71], the term "mediascape" is used here in a somewhat enlarged sense, as it includes also the private use of photography and video, besides printed and audiovisual mass-media technologies such as newspapers, television, or cinema.
5. Philippe Antoine, oral communication, 2002.

6. The few movie theaters which are still running are frequented mostly by young men, who come to view violent action or "soft" sex movies, the only shows that are still able to attract them.
7. In 1999, according to Gomez [2000: 20], only 14.3 percent of the Dakar households were equipped with video-players.
8. Very few people are able to purchase parabolic antennas (dishes) that give access to satellite broadcast channels, such as CNN (US), Canal Horizons (French), or a few Arabic networks.
9. These data were collected in 2002 by a local survey agency (BDA), on the basis of a representative sample of the Dakar metropolitan population over 18 years old.
10. While the term *telenovela*—the literal translation of which could be "tele-novel"—is commonly used in Latin American countries, it is unknown in West Africa, where people—whether professionally involved in their broadcasting or publics receiving them—refer to them using the French words *film* or *série*.
11. On an ordinary weekday, about half of the entire Brazilian population, estimated to be 160 million, is watching three to four *telenovelas* between seven- and ten o'clock at night.
12. Profits are made through the sale of advertising space, of commercials inserted into the narrative, and of by-products such as records, for instance.
13. Despite these differences about the narrative form, the ways *telenovelas* and *soap operas* are received are very similar [Gillespie 1995].
14. Globo has a department in charge of selecting *telenovelas*, dubbing them into various languages, and selling them to foreign countries. In some cases, the editing of *telenovelas* is modified in order to "water down" their specific Brazilian appearance.
15. Made in Brazil by Globo, it numbers 240 twenty-six-minute-long chapters. It was broadcast in Brazil between May 1998 and January 1999, and in Senegal between December 2000 and April 2002. Audience rating was up to 30 percent of the population over 18 years old [BDA 2002].
16. Made in Mexico by Azteca in 1999, it numbers 240 twenty-six-minute-long chapters. It was broadcast in Senegal between June 2000 and July 2002, with a low 10 percent audience rating [BDA 2002].
17. This Brazilian *telenovela* produced by Globo numbers up to 240 chapters, and its audience rating was up to 40 percent of the Senegalese population over 18 years old [BDA 2002]. It was broadcast in Senegal between December 2000 and April 2002.
18. The title *Sublime Lie* refers to the gift of her baby by a mother in order to help her daughter. The two women gave birth the same day, in the same clinic, and as the daughter's baby was stillborn her mother decided to exchange the babies, thus lying to her husband and to her own daughter and creating a much confused family situation.
19. All the Wolof terms are transcribed following the norms which have been worked out by the Centre de Linguistique Appliquée de l'Université de Dakar (CLAD). See the Wolof-French dictionary published in 1990 by Fal *et al.*
20. Cartoons, for instance, are broadcast in the afternoon, after five P.M., once the children have come back from school.
21. French has the linguistic status of an official language in Senegal, even though it is losing ground to Wolof in usual social interaction. In Senegal, as in other countries across West Africa, children are educated in French, and a majority of people understand it orally though without reading or writing it.
22. Senegalese educated, middle-class people do not watch *telenovelas*. They consider them stupid programs without any interest and good only for poor and uneducated people like their servants.

23. Usually, in *telenovelas*, black-skinned people are ascribed to lower-class roles (like servant ones), a feature that does reflect their dominated social status in contemporary Brazilian society.
24. The term "poaching" is borrowed from De Certeau [1980: 279–296], who applies it to textual reading as a synonym of the Lévi-Straussian *bricolage* notion.

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