

VERIDIANA ZURITA

TELEVIZINHO #1 -

Interview by Elke Van Campenhout in Tupana,
Amazon region, Brazil / March - 2015



E: We are sitting on a bench next to the residency house in Tupana, a small hamlet spread out alongside the Amazon river. From here, over a period of four months, you're developing the project Televisinho, in collaboration with the riverside communities. Remind me why we are here?

V: Televisinho #1 is the first edition of an ongoing project in which I want to re-enact Brazilian soap operas with people from different backgrounds in Brazil. This edition happens indeed with the riverside community of Tupana. I am starting here because of the specificity of this community, which is very mixed and as such poses a lot of questions regarding where they come from, the relation they have to their culture and what they actually consider it to be.

They come from a very complex history which I'm still trying to figure out. It is a kind of an in-between culture, a mixture of descendants of native indians and of people that came to the region to occupy the land that was abandoned by big agricultural producers, land that was given to them by the military during the dictatorship in Brazil between the 1960's and 80's. The military mission was to massively expand Brazilian agriculture, but it failed, and the land was deserted. That's when people from other regions, from outside the Amazon as well as Amazon inhabitants, started to occupy the land. The project doesn't intend to give a historical panorama of the region and its population, but the complexity of its composition interests me in relation to the history of soap opera in Brazil.

E: So together with them you reenact Brazilian soaps. How do you see this policy of reenactment as a critical or political gesture?

V: The work is not a critique on soaps or television. The critical gesture of the work is rather a process of re-visitation. To re-visit the narratives of soap opera. Every time I revisit something - a place, a person, my perception of something, my relation to something or someone - I am entering into a political process of engaging with something I thought I already knew. I have to 're-politicize' my relation to things. By doing politics I mean: to reposition myself in my understanding of something that seemed to be a given before. So, this is what the re-enactment brings about: you need to invest yourself again in a relation that has come to be perceived as 'natural'. All the parameters of that relation are questioned and that is where we enter into the political gesture.



E: You could call this a politics of attention, or rather a politics of redistribution of attention.

V: Yes. And in this politics of attention you can distinguish a double movement because whenever you reenact something you also undo something. And this is very important. It is not about doing it again but about undoing something that has become 'naturalized' as a model for reproduction. So, reenactment can become a process of undoing what you otherwise might be reproducing. It is a process of becoming aware of this. And that's the challenge.

E: Yes it is a challenge. And also a risk. Because in a way you are creating a problem in this community that was not perceived as a problem before. But this awareness is not necessarily going to change the current situation. Of being in an economic dire situation, of being a bit of a 'forgotten' part of the Brazilian population, of living in an isolated region, disconnected from the big cities, etcetera...

V: No, but I am not here to solve their current situation. The change this project creates is much more subjective and subtle. It is an artistic project before a social one. This project tries to activate an awareness of what it is we are watching. It is not damning television. My interest is rather in exercising ways of watching and of relating to the images that we see. It is an exercise I need to do myself over and over again.

E: What are the different methodologies of reenactment you are using?

V: I have been trying different ways of introducing the reenactments. One is to choose a scene together and study the exact script. This would make for a very framed model of reenactment, and it produces rather a stiff attempt to try fitting into a prescribed format. But it also shows the disembodiment of that form.

Another way is to choose a scene and re-enact its theme, whatever they are talking about, and focus on the drama behind. In this one you have off course much more room for improvisation and reinvention of that narrative, in close relation to those reenacting. Then, a mix-up occurs between the life stories of those reenacting and the stories of the characters. For example two sisters chose the same scene in which the character advises her friend not to abandon her career because of a man. As they both wanted to do the character who gives this advice I had to do the other one. The original scene was short and the advice simple "Never leave your job and career because of a man". They chose to improvise instead of learning the text by heart and this created a process in which each of them developed a discourse of their own around the theme, very probably connected to their own lives.

Another way of approaching reenactment is to just talk about the soap. In this case a more documentary aspect appears when they talk about the soap while relating it to their own stories.

E: How important is this mixing of fiction and nonfiction elements for developing your research methodology?

V: The first thing that changes is the process of producing an image. There is a mutual exchange happening in this process. When I decide to film a moment that is more documentary and the person shifts from being filmed as herself into the character we have been working on, in this moment she takes charge of the image that is being produced. There is a 'dribble' movement going on. The one being filmed dribbles the one filming by changing positions between her documentary and fictional role. That creates a very specific attention whilst filming. I had to be quite aware of the indications the participants were giving me when I was filming their daily life. Many of them became active agents in the filming process. This made me quite alert.

E: Did you try to enhance this mutual exchange throughout the process?

V: This shifting between fiction and nonfiction happened because of one of the participants, Daracol. She really changed something in the work by constantly shifting between roles while doing a scene. She would be in the character, then start to direct me, saying what I had to say, then going back into character, talking to the camera, talking to the camera man.... She would take on all the perspectives that made up the scene. She was a master in oscillating between the meta and ground level of the scene. In fact she was doing the "editing" while reenactment. This was quite impressive for me.

E: You stayed at people's house for more or less 3 days at a time. How does the filming process evolve throughout these days?

V: When I first arrived, I had a clear idea of what we would do each day but at the same time I discovered I had to be open to listen to anything that could interrupt my script. These interruptions were very important because they gave me an indication of the intention and investment of the participants in the process. The interest from the participant's side didn't necessarily come out at the moment I was expecting it.



So my attention was focussed on looking for the moments where I could enter that person's narrative, which was off course different for every one of them. And then there were the totally unexpected moments when we all thought we were done with the work and then something happened. Someone picked up a line of a character, or started being more playful about what happened in the last days, and a different quality of reenactment appeared.

E: You came back after years of working in Europe as an artist. And this part of the research mainly plays in Brazil. What is your relation to Brazil. Or, how Brazilian are you and what does that mean to you? Why do you come back with a project that is focussed on identity?

V: When I come back after a few years away I enter Brazil in a different way, this dislocation creates a different relation. I feel much more Brazilian when I am in Europe. When I am here I feel foreign. In Brazil the colonizer is within, there is an internalized colonizer logic that relates to borders and the economic centralization of power. Brazil carries a paradoxical atmosphere of guilt, the uncomfortable identification with the colonizer (usually represented by social status) or with the abuse of power. 'Me', as the white woman coming from São Paulo, is in some places seen as nothing more than the descendent of the hostile invader who came and stripped Brazil bare and is now leaving. It is sometimes very hard to relate to people outside of these representations. As it is very hard for people from here (in

Tupana) to be seen as something else than the exotic native indian working with techniques passed on by their ancestors, and me next to them as the tourist. It is much easier to simplify the complexity and paradoxical relations within a culture and to categorize individuals as part of a generalized group. We all carry our stigmas here. Either by being the tourist, the local, the foreigner, the native. The soap opera is a great tool to dialogue with my Brazilian-ness because using it I can connect with people who are not part of my social bubble.

That's why it is important for me to be part of the reenactment and not be outside, as the producer of the images.

When I decide to re-enact too I'm being put in place as well. Things become a little bit more problematic, more interesting questions appear than if I would only be behind the camera. By reenactment together we are sharing a common problem. Of course we come from different places and in relation to them I am part of 'the elite' in Brazil. But when we reenact together we deal with these paradoxical contexts, we start to share some kind of potential fragility. I am not a soap actress, neither are they, and the cameraman is even less professional. Everything was amateur, and this brought a mutual trust to the project.

E: I think putting yourself in the image makes you indeed more fragile and it raises a lot of questions. What is she doing? Why is she there and acting in that way? Why is she not just talking? Somehow it makes the whole machinery become more visible.

V: Yes, I think what happened is that I embodied some kind of over-the-top acting, as if I channel the norm of soap operas, or the parody of soap opera acting. In a way my acting doesn't change at all throughout the whole process, I am the same, I am reproducing a kind of acting which is very alienating. I am the cliché. And this was a choice for me. When you see the people from here reenacting they are much more themselves, there is some kind of reality in the reenactment of a fiction that I could never access and so I decided to assume my role and stay in the parody. You see much more the differences in embodying the characters and dealing with the processes of reenactment with the other actors and that becomes more and more interesting for me.

E: You started this project with the question in how far soap images are normative towards identification processes, pretty much everywhere in Brazil (and elsewhere). Now, specifically in relation to the people here, what could you say after this long period of filming and living here? In how far is the life here indeed mimicking or mirroring images produced by television?

V: I think there is change in my perspective toward the soap operas in Brazil. I have a more complex point of view than the rather negative and critical one I had before. I realize more now that the soaps actually invite you to either be subjected to those images and narratives or to establish a more active relation to them. You can identify with them, but not necessarily because you blindly mimic what you see. Many times when I was talking to people about soap I noticed that the characters they were most focused on were not necessarily their object of desire but a subject to discuss, to be judgmental about, to agree and to disagree with. And I think that's an aspect of some Brazilian soaps, that they show normative representations as well as non-normative ones, and that they stir up some kind of social tension and discussion. I now think the soap is a much more complex given than just a normative model.

E: But you could also say that the emotionality that is triggered by these moral universals like 'the killing of the father', the 'sorrow of the mother', are in some way the 'opium of the soap': the stuff that everybody relates to and that triggers some kind of inter-passivity. People give over to the images and characters that live the big emotions for them, they let the drama of life be played out by the actors on the screen, so they don't have to anymore. What we could have done with our own lives the soaps do for us.

V: I am not sure the archetypes of the soaps here are so empty as you suggest. I think there are quite complex ones. But indeed what you see is that sometimes this complexity can bring the audience to more 'empty' judgments. For example in one soap a woman is married with a man for 35 years and suddenly he tells her that he is a homosexual but still loves her and doesn't want to leave her. Yet he wants to experiment his sexuality with men. She agrees and they stay for some time married and at the same time he dates outside of the marriage. That's not really a typical couple archetype. What I noticed is that while this woman was sharing her life with her homosexual husband people here couldn't really talk about it. They didn't really have an opinion about the situation because they couldn't relate to her choice. As soon as she decided to divorce though, people started to comment on the drama. As soon as she positioned herself more 'clearly', or in a way that people could identify with, the drama became a subject of conversation. So, we are not talking here about soaps always having simple or predictable narratives, but still there is a tendency of people to identify or talk more about them the more 'normal' they get. The complex situations in the soaps seem to be more difficult to talk about outside of stereotypical judgements. But that doesn't mean that the complexity is not bugging people's way of watching those narratives. The complexity is there and is digested in different ways.

E: How does that work in terms of social class, and the images and characters that are presented in the soaps? Do they have a possibly emancipatory character?

V: The soaps that were and are most successful in Brazil are the ones where there is a power struggle going on between social classes. The narrative of the heroic poor guy conquering the abusive rich is quite a typical narrative for successful soap operas in Brazil. I can imagine that the political career of Lula, the poor worker boy that became president, contributes a lot to the identification with this heroic figure. Here you see again this crossing between fiction and non-fictional elements. At the same time there is currently a soap on TV that is set in the 1970's without any mention of the dictatorship. The soap is screened by the TV channel which in the 1970's allied with the military, and had a lot of soap opera scripts censored by the military regime. Yet they were selling these scripts to other countries and even managed to enter socialist countries' television economy. And after the dictatorship they were the television net that would emancipate their production from the United States' economic power play. And promoted a program which started as an arena for soap advertisement and then became one of the forums on television where important social, gender and political issues were articulated. So, Brazilian soap operas are way too complex to be caught in a simple critique.

A lot of my previous research around Brazilian soap operas was connected to the way audience research was done in Brazil. And to how much this kind of research borrowed from advertising research done in America. This comparison reveals the grey zone in which viewers are moulded by the information that is produced by them. Especially because primarily the focus of this research is to measure the parameters that dictate a homogenous desire for consumption in the whole country: in the cities as well as on the remote countryside. But what does that mean in a country so socially complex as Brazil?

So, in my work I am not focused on producing a critique on the soap operas, but I want this complexity to surface. And for that, off course, I need some continuity for the project. The work process is more like an artistic measuring system of all these processes of identification and non-identification with soap characters and narratives. The script writers relate to their audiences in focus groups in order to develop the continuity of the plot. So, in a way they dialogue with what the audience wants to see. But how much plurality of perspectives can these audience focus groups give when the participants are mainly middle class women from the Southeast of Brazil? To do a reenactment with different social groups, from different parts of the country, margins (in the case of Tupana river and centre (future editions of the project) plays with the ways of measuring an audience response to produce 'one image-for-all'. So my intention is not to talk about the riverside community, or about the poor or marginalised groups in Brazil but instead to surface the complexity of difference through the relation with the same object: soap operas. To reenact soaps with these different groups seems to show the discrepancy, to show how distant the model that is being produced is from the concrete life and circumstances of the people that watch the soap.