



# 5 Telemundo

## Telenovelas for the Twenty-First Century

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Telenovelas have been a staple of Latin American television for over half a century. The ability of Spanish-language networks in the United States to attract audiences has likewise been tied to the popularity of their telenovela programming (López 1995). As much as scholars and critics have bemoaned the stereotypical association of telenovelas with *Latinidad*, the genre has proven to be a capacious media object capable of adapting to emergent industrial practices, reflecting social changes, and engendering new narrative formats across the last several decades. The titans of Latin American television such as Mexico's Televisa and Brazil's Globo have long been known for creating classic telenovelas with worldwide, cross-linguistic appeal. At the same time, Colombia's RCN and Venezuela's RCTV have produced runaway hits that give rise to multiple transnational and transmedia adaptations. Understanding the global significance of telenovelas remains a crucial component of making sense of television's heterogeneous geographical and cultural contexts.

Telemundo has been the second most popular Spanish-language broadcast network in the United States for over three decades. During its first two decades, the network consistently trailed Univision in ratings. Because of this long-standing rivalry, to discuss the history of Telemundo means to contend with its positioning vis-à-vis Univision. In the 1990s and 2000s, Telemundo repeatedly attempted to capture new audiences with programming that was starkly different from its rival network's offerings. These attempts were largely unsuccessful. The turn of the century brought about two significant changes that destabilized the Telemundo–Univision relationship. First, Telemundo's incorporation into the Comcast–Universal conglomerate resulted in more resources for the network to develop new types of content at the same time that Univision's financial troubles led to stagnation and lack of content innovation. Second, a part of Telemundo's strategy to develop new content was, in fact, a return to the old: namely,

a newfound embrace of telenovelas. While previously, Telemundo hoped to distinguish itself from Univision's solid telenovela roster, it entered a new era of popularity by turning back to original telenovelas, particularly within the format of the super series. In this chapter, I outline the historical rivalry between Univision and Telemundo to dominate the US Spanish-language television market; then, I explain the importance of the telenovela in Latin American television; and, finally, I analyze Telemundo's recent adaptations of the telenovela genre into a "super series" format. I argue that Telemundo's success with "super series" illustrates not only the enduring significance of telenovelas as a television genre but also the network's response to changing audiences, platforms, and consumption habits.

## A TALE OF TWO NETWORKS

As of 2021, there were five main Spanish-language broadcast networks with national reach in the United States: Univision, Telemundo, UniMás, Estrella TV, and Azteca América. Of these, the power and influence of the first two far outpaces the other three. Given their shared history and influence on the national televisual landscape, we cannot talk about Telemundo without also accounting for its relationship with Univision. For the investors who bought the collection of stations that would become Telemundo, the opportunity for creating another Spanish-language national network in the late 1980s lay in offering content that differed from what Univision was known for. Because one of the major investors in Univision was Mexico's Televisa, Univision screened Televisa's telenovelas back-to-back during primetime. While this content had significant appeal for Spanish-language audiences, that uniformity prevented Univision from developing other types of programming. Telemundo had an opportunity to be the network that "would have access to everything else" (Allen 2020, 156).

When Telemundo premiered in January 1987, it eschewed telenovelas. Its first broadcast was the January 12 nightly newscast of *Noticiero Telemundo*, staffed by Univision's former "dream team" of newscasters and reporters who had left the latter in protest against Televisa's increasing encroaching on the decision-making at Univision. Ostracized talent from Univision would continue to find new opportunities on Telemundo for decades. In addition to the nightly newscast, Telemundo debuted other programming that distinguished it from Univision. The hit series *Cine Millionario* presented famous Spanish-language films every other night at 9 p.m. Six months later, Telemundo premiered *Centro Deportes*, a segment-by-segment replica of ESPN's popular show *SportsCenter*, hosted by former Univision sports personality Tony Tirado. Then came Telemundo's version of *Wheel of Fortune* and, in a partnership with Viacom, the launch of Telemundo MTV (Allen 2020, 158).

In their eagerness to capture the booming Latino market, both Univision and Telemundo overinvested and underperformed during the latter's first three years. Neither network had turned a profit, and at the end of 1989, both acknowledged eight-figure losses. Then came the news that Nielsen would begin collecting ratings on a national scale from Spanish-language audiences. The National Hispanic Television Index (NTHI) promised "the first nationwide service fully dedicated to monitoring the viewing habits

of the diverse Hispanic community” (Allen 2020, 179). While both networks had relied on Arbitron’s local ratings, official ratings at a national scale from Nielsen would offer potentially enormous advertising revenues. A pilot study in early 1992 suggested that Telemundo might have had a competitive advantage, but when Nielsen’s full nationwide study concluded in November of that year, it was clear Univision was the leader. When considering both English- and Spanish-language channels, Univision ranked first and Telemundo second among Latinx viewers, yet when only considering the Spanish-language channels, Univision’s significant lead over Telemundo became even more evident (179).

Following these devastating results and persistent losses, Telemundo declared bankruptcy in 1993. It was sold to Sony in 1997, yet its original programming continually failed to attract audiences. Throughout the latter half of the 1990s, the network fell further behind Univision. However, in 2000, Telemundo premiered the Colombian telenovela *Betty la fea* (RCN) for U.S. audiences and the show became a runaway hit. *Betty la fea* became a worldwide sensation and inspired countless international adaptations (McCabe and Akass 2012). That Telemundo introduced it to US audiences also signaled a renewed interest from other media companies in the network as a gateway to bring international Spanish-language content to domestic audiences. This increased the market value of the network, and Sony eventually sold Telemundo to NBC in 2001. NBC’s subsequent acquisition of Universal Studios in 2004 offered Telemundo the infrastructure to begin producing its own shows, including its hit telenovela *Doña Barbara* (2008), which outperformed Univision’s primetime ratings. Following NBC-Universal’s acquisition by Comcast in 2011, Telemundo’s capacity for original programming was on track to outpace its rival, particularly in the realm of telenovelas.

Despite initially counterprogramming against the genre, Telemundo’s comeback in the 2010s was intimately tied to the genre of telenovelas. The primetime ratings gap between the two networks in 2013 was 1.2 million viewers in favor of Univision, but this gap shrank to 200,000 viewers in 2015. During some weeks in that summer, this gap was merely tens of thousands of viewers (Rodríguez 2015). The second season of *La Reina del Sur* was a triumph for Telemundo as the most successful US Spanish-language fictional program of 2019 in terms of number of viewers. *La Reina* surpassed the rating achieved by the sixth season of *El Señor de los Cielos*, also a Telemundo production and the most successful fictional production of 2018. According to the researchers of the Ibero-American Observatory of Television Fiction (Obitel), telenovelas are still the most important genre in the US Spanish-language television industry, representing 78% of the total titles premiered in 2019 (Piñón 2020).

## **TELENOVELAS AS GENRE, INDUSTRIAL FORMAT, AND TRANS-CONTINENTAL IDENTITY**

Colombian cultural theorist Jesus Martín-Barbero famously argued that the social significance of television in Latin America against any other medium, in terms of the outsized relevance granted to anything that appears on it, reflects the lack of alternative political spaces for the expression and negotiation of social conflict. Martín-Barbero

turned to television as the locus where various publics negotiated the complexity and diversity of cultural identity and concluded that “in no other medium are the contradictions not only of globalization but also of Latin American modernity felt so powerfully” (2013, 159). Within the televisual space, the genre most directly involved with the construction of identity and with the negotiation of social and cultural values was the telenovela. Despite the genre’s often heavy-handed narrative formulas and its complicity with conservative ideologies about class, gender, and race, the telenovela also created opportunities for the contestation of dominant representations. Telenovelas may be primarily a commercial enterprise whose goal is capturing, through the repetitive structure of its series, the ritualistic dimensions of everyday life and mobilizing them in the aims of ad revenue. Nevertheless, by seamlessly conjoining its commercial with its cultural aims, the telenovela connects with new popular sensibilities in ways that often revitalize worn-out media narratives.

Telenovelas have long had a reputation of being repetitive, formulaic, and derivative. Yet the telenovela’s endurance across decades of industrial and technological changes to television’s mode of production also reflects how capacious and flexible telenovelas are as a genre. Early versions of the telenovela featured narratives heavily invested in forging and reflecting a national identity since the main intended market was primarily a domestic one. Depending on the stance these narratives took toward the social issues affecting the nation, telenovelas fell under either the category of “rosy” or “realist” (Acosta-Alzuru 2003). The rosy/realist telenovela dichotomy offered a neat distinction for networks across Latin America to establish their local fare: legacy networks opted for rosy stories that did not tackle social issues head-on while up-and-coming networks aimed to make their mark with more controversial “realist” topics. In truth, though, most telenovela productions throughout the twentieth century were hybrid productions, mixing elements of both types of stories. The varying degrees of adherence to either side of this spectrum would also come to determine the “distinct flavor” of different nation’s telenovela offerings. Specific formal tropes and narrative choices signaled the Argentinian, Brazilian, Colombian, Chilean, Mexican, Venezuelan, and even the US-based telenovela (La Pastina, Rego, and Straubhaar 2003).

The sense of national identity, both in terms of telenovela’s narratives and their formal style, has been less prevalent since the turn of the twenty-first century. In terms of production, distributed co-productions with media centers in Miami, Bogota, and Mexico City necessitate new levels of standardization. Likewise, these international co-productions imagine their audiences as diverse publics located across the continent. The result is a new understanding of telenovelas as a media form for capturing transnational audiences and thus refashioning a hemispheric identity, a move for which *Telemundo* has been at the forefront.

Like with other types of programming, the advent of cable and satellite television impacted the production, distribution, and reception of telenovelas. In particular, the rising investment in niche programming opened the possibility for more generic experimentation in telenovela narratives. Older subgenres, like the children’s, musical, and period drama telenovelas, found new dedicated audiences while newer subgenres, like narco, thriller, and horror, brought in audiences that had previously not been associated

with telenovelas (Piñón, Cassano, and Mujica 2021). While a constant across various telenovela iterations has been its adherence to the tropes of melodrama, these tropes have also allowed for formal experimentation. Maria Mercedes Borkosky identifies as a key feature of the “new telenovela” the genre’s boundary crossing between fiction and nonfiction, particularly as documentary aesthetics and ripped-from-the-headlines storylines become all the more common (Borkosky 2016).

Finally, there is the issue of platforms. Webnovelas, for instance, are shorter narratives that draw on the traditional telenovela star system to create bilingual content for English-speaking Latinx audiences. These web-based narratives take advantage of online interactive forms through contests, chats, interviews, polls, and virtual castings, which further user engagement and potential revenue (Piñón 2013). In addition to partnering with production companies across Latin America, Telemundo’s transnational co-productions also include deals with streaming video on-demand platforms like Netflix (de Pablos 2016). In short, the telenovela’s changes across different historical, geographical, and industrial contexts demonstrate the genre’s high adaptability and continued resonance with audiences across the continent.

## A TELENOVELA BY ANY OTHER NAME

It is this adaptability and resonance that Telemundo has now embraced. Following its acquisition by Comcast, Telemundo announced a new branding strategy for its programming: “super series,” a hybrid form that mixes the traditional melodramatic elements of the telenovela with the narrative length of a traditional US television series. Super series halve the number of telenovela episodes airing continuously during a given year but section off the story into seasons, returning every year with new plots for the main characters. For media scholar Juan Piñón, the emergence of super series has transformed the face of fictional serial telenovelas in prime-time and best represents the possibilities of disruption within continuity in television programming (2019). Alternatively described as “gritty,” “edgy,” or “lurid,” these telenovelas are characterized by higher production budgets, a prevalence of on-location shooting, and a greater emphasis on action sequences. Since then, the network’s promotion foregrounds its commitment to “contemporary content” that relates to both topical issues and new forms of programming. Luis Silberwasser, president of Telemundo between 2014 and 2018, argued that the network’s super series would not stick “solely to melodrama” because they “can’t pretend *Game of Thrones* and *The Sopranos* don’t exist” (Rodriguez 2015).

The first of these new super series was *El Señor de los Cielos*, about Aurelio Casillas, a fictionalized version of the infamous trafficker Amado Carrillo Fuentes. Premiering in April 2013, *El Señor* represented an “experiment” for the network to “bridge the cultural gap between the Spanish-language audience’s comfort level with the Monday-Friday novela structure and the network’s interest in building franchises with multi-year legs” (Littleton 2013). In contrast to the not uncommon practice of creating sequels to popular telenovelas, *El Señor* was intended from the start to offer a continuing storyline that could span multiple seasons. This “experiment” would also attempt to combine the melodrama of romance-driven telenovelas with a “grittier tone.”

The super series model of programming turned out to be quite profitable for Telemundo. The traditional model would require selling advertisers on an upcoming telenovela by virtue of its stars and expected success. The super series model grants the network greater leverage when negotiating advertising rates for subsequent seasons. Not all super series were successful (e.g. the 2016 comedy *¿Quién es quién?*), but those that proved popular could command higher rates after their first seasons as bankable successes (Littleton 2016). The format also enabled Telemundo executives to greenlight more projects, as each attempt to connect with audiences required fewer episodes. Seasons opened the possibility of returning to successful stories for years to come, while limiting investments of time and money in failures. Long-term, the shift toward multi-season telenovelas also enabled the network to maintain audience interest across several years, offering the potential for sustaining ratings and, thus, advertising revenue.

Adapting the popular genre of telenovelas to a new format resulted in storytelling changes, too. Because of the different production timeline and lengthier post-production, super series writers finalized their scripts almost a year in advance of the series premiere. This represents a change from the traditional telenovela style, in which scriptwriting continued even once the series was on air. From a production standpoint, such a move simplifies production schedules and reduces total costs. When a super series fails to engage audiences, however, there is little opportunity for creatives to course correct. Early in the development of Telemundo's new telenovela format, former telenovela writers hired to script super series lamented their inability to make significant changes to the story to respond to audience interests (Acosta-Alzuru 2016). Super series production schedules are thus closer to the series found in English-language broadcast networks.

Upon further inspection, many of the super series are retreads of similar plot setups and characters. These series are not unlike traditional telenovelas in how they promise a familiar narrative tied to a close network of characters and quotidian plots. This aspect has been most notable within the most popular theme tackled by Telemundo super series: *narco-telenovelas*, or shows about drug traffickers. Indeed, the early super series offerings evidenced a formulaic narrative setup that played out repeatedly across different contexts and with different actors. Season one of *Señora Acero* in late 2014, followed by *Dueños del Paraíso* in early 2015, exemplified this trend. While the former takes place on the modern-day US–Mexico border and the latter occurs in 1980s Miami, the setup of the story is nearly identical: a woman married to a narcotrafficker finds she had been betrayed on her wedding day when rival cartels interrupt the festivities with a bloody shootout. For the rest of both telenovelas, we find the heroine striving to protect her remaining family and seeking vengeance.

In addition to its new offerings, Telemundo has re-integrated previously popular narco-themed programming into its super series. When the network invested a record \$10 million for *La Reina del Sur*, an adaptation of Arturo Perez-Reverte's novel, the telenovela was not only the network's most expensive at the time, but also its highest-rated (Guthrie 2011). The sixty-episode narrative told a self-contained story closely following Perez-Reverte's novel. However, given the popularity of this first series, Telemundo commissioned a sequel series *La Reina del Sur 2*, and the first sixty episodes

were retroactively deemed the first season of the now-ongoing super series (Villafañe 2020). Likewise, between 2016 and 2018, Telemundo released a sequel super series to its previously successful telenovela *Sin Senos No Hay Paraíso* (2008) and, in 2019, premiered a spin-off series called *El Final del Paraíso*.

That Telemundo joins in the collective production of narco-themed audiovisual media is not surprising. What is notable is that these productions have, for the most part, signaled the rise of the Spanish-language network to rival its biggest competitor Univision. Industry analysts and Telemundo's own spokespeople attribute the ratings success to the development of these productions (Garsd 2015). For the announcement of the network's highly anticipated (pre-COVID-19 pandemic) 2020 programming, Telemundo's marketing department touted that "action-packed narco-dramas and suspenseful thrillers will be the cornerstone of Telemundo's [lineup]" (Villafañe 2019). Something about this distinct iteration of the telenovela, one that merges the super series format with the theme of narcotrafficking, has given the network the edge it has long wanted to bridge the ratings gap with Univision.

That *something*, I argue, depends in part on the potential that telenovelas reformatted as super series hold for franchise building. The telenovela genre has always been primed for world building: airing daily, featuring multiple characters, and telling sprawling narratives are all strategies that allow for robust explorations of a fictional world over the course of months. Through its rebranding of telenovelas as super series, Telemundo has been able to tap into these generic traits and mine them for narrative fuel. The interconnections between existing and upcoming series not only build popularity but also further the canon of Telemundo's original programming. Character crossovers also remind audiences that these characters' stories will resume in subsequent seasons. The network's strategies in promoting these narco-fictions reveal a concerted effort to develop a transmedia universe. It further pushes these strategies of primetime melodrama across media forms, creating comics, webisodes, and virtual reality promotional experiences that expand the world beyond the television screen. For example, the network has developed online-exclusive content for its most successful series as a means to foster the show's audience during the breaks between seasons, such as "secret episodes" for *El Señor de los Cielos* or a digital comic book for *Señora Acero*. These transmedia offerings, along with the super series' multiseason structure, ensure that these fictional worlds persist for years, creating a strong foundation for the network to try out different spin-offs and extensions.

Elsewhere, I have referred to these transmedia efforts from Telemundo as an attempt to build a "narco-televisual universe" (Llamas-Rodríguez 2018). Indeed, narco-themed fare within Telemundo's refashioned telenovelas have regularly relied on introducing and then recalling a continuously expanding roster of characters beyond their original narratives. The fictional universe instantiated by the popular series *El Señor de los Cielos* further expanded when its fifth season featured Leandro Quezada, the villain from the short-lived series *Dueños del Paraíso* (2015), whose setting in the past contributed to the development of a history for this universe (Gonzalez 2017). Although *Dueños del Paraíso* was canceled after its first season, its original characters (and the actors who play them) now act as a creative reservoir from which to draw for new shows or for

future iterations of more successful shows. Notably, however, the network's attempts at continuing its popular series *El Señor de los Cielos* and *Señora Acero* without each series' original protagonist have failed. This suggests that, despite all their diegetic connections, the success of many of Telemundo's narco-themed super series remains tied to classic forms of telenovela promotion, particularly its adherence to the appeal of specific celebrities.

Finally, the habitual aspect of telenovelas that Martín-Barbero recognized continues to explain why super series effectively capture their new audiences' attention. Super series can draw from daily headlines to inspire multiple seasons of their fictional narco-narratives. Telemundo audiences are already exposed to the brutality of drug cartels during primetime news following the telenovelas, extending the world-building televisual flow across fictional and nonfiction programming. Given this exposure, audiences are unlikely to watch fictional narcotrafficker's stories solely as apologia for those crimes, and, instead, may read the turmoils of their antiheroes allegorically. Likewise, Telemundo's transmedia strategies to promote its super series often connect these to real-life occurrences. For instance, a promotional virtual reality clip for *El Chema* released in December 2015 featured a prison escape through a tunnel, mirroring the escape of infamous drug cartel leader Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán the previous year (Telemundo 2016). These connections between real-life issues and fictional narco-narratives once again prove how super series follow in the tradition of the "new telenovela."

The gradual assembly of Telemundo's "narco-televisual universe" reflects the continued appeal of everyday stories to fuel fictional world building in fragmented yet generative ways. These narco-novelas present a complex intermeshing of popular cultural coordinates with emergent industrial formats. In this regard, Telemundo's resurgence in the twenty-first century proves intimately tied to the telenovela's high adaptability and ability to cross narrative and platform boundaries. Analyzing the network's "super series" strategy through its most popular subgenre, the narco-novelas, reveals how this format merges enduring telenovela staples (serial melodrama, celebrity recognition, and socially embedded stories) with media franchising logics (transmedia paratexts, spinoffs, and retcons). Ultimately, these recent transformations to the transnational genre of the telenovela reveal its potential for world building both in the textual sense, as it finds new platforms and formats to tell its stories, and in the industrial sense, as it continues to produce new markets at a global scale.

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