

Mediático presents an entry by [Juan Ramos](#), PhD student in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Sussex, and one of the founding co-editors of this blog.

On January 6th 2014, actor Mónica Spear was murdered during a roadside robbery in her native Venezuela. She and her ex-husband, Thomas Henry Berry, were gunned down in front of their 5-year-old daughter that evening.

Her high profile as a telenovela star and former Miss Venezuela turned the sad event into international news the following day. Traditional news outlets from around the world reported her death while many took to Twitter and other social media networks to express their dismay, anger, or disbelief upon learning the tragic news. Industry colleagues, fans, politicians and other public figures, all seemed to have [something to say](#) about Mónica Spear or the circumstances in which she lost her life.

Many called on the Venezuelan government to react to the escalating violence the country has been victim to for years. President Maduro swiftly [responded](#) by promising to crack down on the murderers. However, only a few days later, he spoke publicly to accuse Venezuelan commercial television and, in particular, [telenovelas](#), of encouraging criminal behavior and violence. One could interpret this to mean that telenovelas were responsible, however indirectly, for the death of Mónica Spear. Nevermind that telenovelas in Venezuela are the subject of very strict regulations under a law on social responsibility on radio and television ([Ley Resorte](#)) promoted by the late president Hugo Chávez. While countries like Colombia, Mexico, Chile, Argentina and the United States have incorporated violence and even more or less explicit sex in some of their telenovelas (notably in the so-called *narconovelas*), Venezuela has lagged behind on this trend either because of the regulations imposed by the government or because of self-censorship.

The Venezuelan media landscape has changed radically in the last few years. Traditionally, television in Venezuela was dominated by two national broadcasters, RCTV and Venevisión,

both of which invested heavily in telenovelas. These television dramas were often exported to international markets. Back in 2007, [RCTV ceased](#) its free-to-air transmission as the government had refused to renew their broadcast license alleging the network had supported the coup that ousted Hugo Chávez, albeit briefly, in 2002.

At the time, RCTV's primetime telenovela was *Mi prima Ciela* (My Cousin Ciela), starring Mónica Spear in the role of a terminally ill teenager who is denied the happy ending most telenovelas offer as she ends up dying. *Mi prima Ciela* was her first starring role although she had already played the villain in 2006's *El desprecio* (Contempt) also in RCTV.

Mónica Spear first came to prominence when she won Miss Venezuela in 2004. The beauty contest is the single biggest media event in the country, drawing a huge audience during its annual live telecast on Venevisión, and not at all an unusual route into acting for young women.

Mónica Spear continued to work for RCTV after the network's move to cable; she starred in *Calle luna, calle sol* (Worlds Apart) and a special participation in *Que el cielo me explique* (A Match Made in Heaven).

Her last telenovela in Venezuela was 2010's *La mujer perfecta* (The Perfect Woman) in which she played a young woman with Aspergers Syndrome. Indeed a challenging role for a young actor written by the veteran writer Leonardo Padrón known for his realistic style and progressive social themes in often conservative genre.

After signing an exclusivity contract with US Hispanic network Telemundo, Mónica Spear starred in what would become her final two telenovelas: *Flor salvaje* (Wild Flower), filmed in Colombia and in which she played the role of a mestizo girl, Amanda, who becomes a prostitute in an unnamed South American country; and *Pasión prohibida* (Forbidden Love) in which she was Bianca, a woman married to a much older wealthy man, who falls in love

with her husband's nephew. What made her last telenovela unusual is not just that the protagonist dies (like in *Mi prima Ciela*) but that she commits suicide, a fate normally reserved for villains.

At the age of 29, Mónica Spear's brief but fruitful acting career (atypically characterized, as we have seen, by tragic roles) had made her famous in many countries. The combination of her transnational stardom (Miss Venezuela, telenovelas); Venezuela's sociopolitical situation (Hugo Chávez's enduring legacy) and the government's contentious relationship with privately-owned national media and hostile discourse against the telenovela genre; and her violent death at a young age continue to attract [international attention](#) even over a month after her murder.

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