



# Bulletin of Spanish Studies

Hispanic Studies and Researches on Spain, Portugal and Latin America

ISSN: 1475-3820 (Print) 1478-3428 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cbhs20>

## Television Serial Fiction in Spain: Between Deregulation and the Analogue Switch-off (1990–2010)

Charo Lacalle & Núria Simelio

To cite this article: Charo Lacalle & Núria Simelio (2019) Television Serial Fiction in Spain: Between Deregulation and the Analogue Switch-off (1990–2010), *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, 96:8, 1273-1288, DOI: [10.1080/14753820.2019.1648022](https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2019.1648022)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2019.1648022>



Published online: 20 Aug 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 41



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Television Serial Fiction in Spain: Between Deregulation and the Analogue Switch-off (1990–2010)\*

CHARO LACALLE & NÚRIA SIMELIO

*Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*

## Introduction

Home-produced Spanish television fiction first aired in 1954 with a comedy, *Galería de maridos*, introducing the theme of romantic relationships that would become a regular feature in cinema and television in Spain until the early eighties. From 1954 to 1982 (the period spanning the two last decades of the Franco regime to the government of the Unión de Centro Democrático [UCD]) Televisión Española (TVE) aired fifty-six programmes ranging from comedies of intrigue, crime and adventure, to portraits of everyday life, and adaptations of canonical works of literature: among the most successful of these were the horror anthology, *Historias para no dormir* (1969), the adventure series *Curro Jiménez* (1977–1978) and the youth drama *Verano azul* (1981–1982).

These series reflected the gradual transformation of traditions and customs towards the end of the dictatorship and its immediate aftermath, along with a reappraisal of aspects of the Spanish literary heritage that had no direct connection with the political and historical context.<sup>1</sup> However, it was not until the second stage, coinciding with the period spanning the two

---

\* This article is part of a larger research project entitled ‘Historia de la programación y programas de ficción televisiva en España (cadenas de ámbito estatal): de la desregulación al apagón analógico, 1990–2010’, funded by the Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad del Gobierno de España under grant number CSO2015-66260-C4-4-P.

1 The first literary adaptation (*Cuentos y leyendas* [1968–1976]) aired by TVE consisted of an anthology of stories by a selection of Spanish writers—including José de Espronceda, Emilia Pardo Bazán and Tirso de Molina. This was followed by *La saga de los Rius* (1966–1967), *Cañas y barro* (1978), *La barraca* (1979), *Fortunata y Jacinta* (1980), *Los gozos y las sombras* (1982) and *Juanita la larga* (1982). Two dramatized biographies were also produced: one on Miguel de Cervantes, with a script written by Nobel Prize-winning author

consecutive governments of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) (1982–1990), that television fiction embarked on a gradual process of renewal that addressed previously taboo topics (the Spanish Civil War, homosexuality etc.) and culminating in a fully-fledged television production industry in the mid nineties. This evolution was facilitated by changing attitudes to genre, format and content, as well as changes to production including: the introduction of drafted ‘handbooks’; the organization of episodes into Acts and storylines into seasons; script supervision and co-ordination; and market studies to inform plot and character development etc.<sup>2</sup>

This paper forms part of a diachronic study of this key period in Spanish television fiction from the period of industry deregulation to the analogue switch-off (ASO) (1990–2010). Focusing on twenty-three domestic serials broadcast on state-wide channels during the period in question, our aim is to analyse the introduction and evolution of the long-running serial in Spain in relation to historical context, content and other aspects related to television serial production, including the adaptation to the local audience of Latin-American *telenovelas* and, to a lesser extent, English-language soap operas.<sup>3</sup>

### The Origins of the Television Serial Format in Spain

In 1979, the UCD government proclaimed an order issued by the Ministry of Culture (then responsible for public television) granting TVE an extraordinary credit of 1.3 million *pesetas* to boost the production of feature films and television fiction through public tender. The objective was twofold: to stimulate the production of television fiction and revive an ailing film industry that had exhausted the once profitable format of comedies starring popular actors such as José Luis López Vázquez, Tony Leblanc, Gracita Morales, Lina Morgan and Alfredo Landa.

---

Camilo José Cela (*Cervantes* [1981]) and another on Santiago Ramón y Cajal (*Ramón y Cajal* [1982]).

2 Mario García de Castro, ‘Los movimientos de renovación en las series televisivas españolas’, *Comunicar. Revista Científica Iberoamericana de Comunicación y Educación*, 30 (2008), 147–53; Mercedes Medina, *Series de televisión: el caso de ‘Médico de familia’, ‘Cuéntame cómo pasó’ y ‘Los Serrano’* (Madrid: Ediciones Internacionales Universitarias, 2008).

3 With regard to the distinction between ‘serial’ and ‘series’, generally speaking, the serial is defined by its use of a continuous cast and narrative continuity across episodes, whilst ‘series’ describes a complex discourse whose units are not interchangeable. A number of critics identify serials with long-running television dramas. See Robert C. Allen, ‘Making Sense of Soaps’, in *The Television Studies Reader*, ed. Robert C. Allen & Annette Hill (London/New York: Routledge, 2004), 242–57; Robert C. Allen, ‘Introduction’, in *To Be Continued...: Soap Operas around The World*, ed. Robert C. Allen (London/New York: Routledge, 1995), 1–26; Roger Hagedorn, ‘Doubtless To Be Continued: A Brief History of Serial Narrative’, in *To Be Continued...: Soap Operas around the World*, ed. Allen, 27–48.

During two consecutive PSOE governments headed by Felipe González, this measure led to the airing of seventy-nine titles:<sup>4</sup> forty-six miniseries, twenty-three series, eight anthology series, a comedy sketch show and a serial drama.<sup>5</sup> This last one, *El olivar de Atocha* (1989) was created with a view to making the most economical use of the state television company's resources. It marked TVE's first foray into the serial format influenced by outstanding audience ratings in the eighties in Spain for Latin-American *telenovelas* including *Los ricos también lloran* (1986) and *Cristal* (1989), and North American soap operas like *Dallas* (1979–1981) and *Falcon Crest* (1981–1990).

In line with some of the great miniseries of this decade (*Crónica del alba* [1984], *Los veraneantes* [1985], *Clase media* [1987], *Visperas* [1987], *Vida privada* [1987], *Lorca, muerte de un poeta* [1987–88]), *El olivar de Atocha* is set during the period leading up to 1936. Inspired by the popular British series *Upstairs Downstairs* (BBC1, 1971–1975),<sup>6</sup> Lola Salvador's screenplay follows the vicissitudes of the arrival in Madrid in 1898 and social rise of Antonio Maldonado (Nacho Martínez), and associated characters (family, employees etc.), over the decades leading up to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.

A vast sound stage was built to shoot the exterior locations (beyond the protagonist's home) occupied by the relevant peripheral characters.<sup>7</sup> At first, it would take the crew some eight minutes daily to produce something on video: this was gradually reduced to four or five minutes as the crew became more familiar with the techniques of serial production. The average cost was around 10 million *pesetas* per 55-minute episode, although as this

---

4 Seventeen of these new releases were European co-productions, with the participation of TVE in exchange for broadcasting rights in Spain.

5 We use the structural classification of fiction formats made by Milly Buonanno: TV movie, miniseries, series and serial (open and closed). Consequently, we use the term *telenovela* to refer to Latin-American serial fiction formats and the term *serial* for Spanish productions. See Milly Buonanno, 'La masa y el relleno: la miniserie en la ficción italiana', *DeSignis. Publicación de la Federación Latinoamericana de Semiótica*, 7–8 (2005), 19–30 (p. 20). An anthology drama is a series of one-off episodes, also known in Spain as 'unitaries' (see Paul Julian Smith, 'Copycat Television? *Gran Hotel*/Grand Hotel [2011–13] and *El hotel de los secretos*/The Hotel of Secrets [2015–16]', *Studies in Spanish & Latin American Cinemas*, 14:3 [2017], 349–65).

6 *Upstairs, Downstairs* recounts, over the first three decades of the twentieth century, the parallel but antagonistic lives of an English politician's family and their domestic staff who inhabit the mansion. The numerous plots featuring masters and servants are interspersed with real events that occurred at the time, such as the sinking of the Titanic, the First World War, the 1929 Wall Street Crash, which in one way or another had repercussions for the various characters.

7 José Ramón Pérez Ornia, 'La futura serie "El olivar de Atocha" narrará la vida cotidiana previa a la guerra civil', *El País*, 18 August 1987; available at <[https://elpais.com/diario/1987/08/18/radiotv/556236004\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/diario/1987/08/18/radiotv/556236004_850215.html)> (accessed 28 December 2018).

figure only includes external costs (hiring actors and other services)<sup>8</sup> the profitability of this new format was relative. This, in addition to poor viewing figures, undoubtedly influenced TVE's decision not to revisit this format until 1992 with *Dime Luna* (La 2, 1993), a Spanish-Brazilian co-production adapted from the *telenovela Doña Xepa/The Penny Lady* (Rede Globo, 1977). Focusing on a humble working-class woman at odds with her children's adulthood ambitions, this second foray into the genre also failed to attract an audience and the show was cancelled after a few weeks.

Between 1990 and 2010, Spanish television broadcasters launched 339 homegrown fiction productions, thirty-four of them serials.<sup>9</sup> Yet, although the use of the serial format on the TVE1 schedule was significantly rising, starting with *Yedra* (1993–1994)—a forty-two-episode co-production with the Italian Mediaset company—it was not until 2005 that TVE made a second attempt at a fictional series set in the past consolidating its afternoon programme with *Amar en tiempos revueltos* (2005–2012).<sup>10</sup>

### From the *telenovela* and the Soap Opera to the Serial

The long-running serial format like the soap opera and the *telenovela* from which it was inspired, is characterized by romantic conflict and hardship.<sup>11</sup> Storylines tend to centre around a loving relationship beset by events involving hatred, betrayal and revenge generated by the interactions between stereotypically polarized, and Manichaeian, characters.<sup>12</sup> This format also highlights the family and female characters from social sectors, such as housewives or the elderly, that tend to feature little in other

---

8 The expenses of the in-house staff and technical resources of TVE were not included (see Pérez Ornia, 'La futura serie "El olivar de Atocha"').

9 In that same period, Spanish channels also released seven youth serial dramas. We do not include these in this paper as they differ substantially in terms of characterization and theme, and the pace and narrative structure also varies markedly from those intended for the adult, mostly female, market.

10 The change in direction of TVE's homegrown fiction production, after the two socialist governments of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (2004–2012), determined the end of *Amar en tiempos revueltos* on TVE1 and its continuation on Antena3, from 2013, with the title *Amar es para siempre*, which was as successful as its predecessor.

11 Nora Mazziotti, 'Viejas historias, nuevos mercados: tensiones entre lo local y lo global en la circulación de las telenovelas', *La Puerta FBA*, 1 (2004), 94–102; and Omar Rincón, 'First Take: Our Telenovela, Ourselves', *ReVista. Harvard Review of Latin America*, XVII:1 (2017), 2–8 (p. 3).

12 Nora Mazziotti, *Telenovela: industria y prácticas sociales* (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2006); and María del Mar Chicharro Merayo, 'Historia de la telenovela en España: aprendizaje, ensayo y apropiación de un género', *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 24:1 (2011), 189–216.

television programmes.<sup>13</sup> The successful adaptation of the *telenovela* and the soap opera to other markets stems from the flexibility of the serial format and the universality of its contents. As Omar Rincón points out: ‘The telenovela shows us, over and over again, that to be universal, one must not lose the framework of local identity’.<sup>14</sup> This, together with its relatively low production cost, makes it a unique product in the television industry. It is a social phenomenon that brings together a common language and cultural back-drop and that confirms the appetite for melodrama: fiction involving emotional and family issues concerning women.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, the evolution of this format (the long-running serial) allows for straightforward transformation and adaptation to generate closer proximity to the local audience.<sup>16</sup> In the Spanish environment, *costumbrista* serials were influenced by the narrative structure and duration of English-language soap operas (the former being more open-ended, with more stories and an ensemble cast, the latter being indeterminate and thus capable of being extended indefinitely).<sup>17</sup> The influence of soap opera also had an impact on the legacy of the *telenovela* in the Spanish serial, as the characters involved are much closer to ordinary people than to the traditional stereotypes of Latin-American melodrama.<sup>18</sup>

Spanish serials are usually broadcast from Monday to Friday in episodes typically lasting around forty-five minutes. Episodes are generally structured in four Acts, ending on a cliff-hanger, with slow-moving narrative and systematic use of close-up to provide the intimacy characteristic of the

13 Marta Ortega Lorenzo & Montserrat Solsona, ‘Demografía, cambio familiar y telenovelas: de la realidad a la representación y viceversa’, in *Familias de ayer, familias de hoy: continuidades y cambios en Cataluña*, ed. Xavier Roigé Icaria (Barcelona: Icaria, 2006), 535–63.

14 Rincón, ‘First Take: Our Telenovela, Ourselves’, 6.

15 Fernando Morales & Núria Simelio, ‘Television and Identities: Analysis of the Consumption of “telenovelas” by the Latin American Community in Spain’, *Identities*, 23:5 (2016), 591–609 (p. 595). See also, Jesús Martín Barbero, ‘Televisión, melodrama y vida cotidiana’, *Signo y Pensamiento*, 6:11 (1987), 59–72 (p. 66).

16 See Nora Mazziotti, ‘La expansión de la telenovela’, *Contratexto*, 14 (2006), 127–40; and Maria Immacolata Vassallo de Lopes, ‘Telenovela brasileira: una narrativa sobre a nação’, *Comunicação e Educação*, 26 (2003), 17–34.

17 Ina Bertrand, ‘A Bicentennial History: The Australian Television Miniseries’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 10:3 (1990), 293–303; Carlos Aranz, Charo Lacalle & Lorenzo Vilches, ‘The Moment of Local Fiction—Spanish TV Fiction in 2001’, in *Eurofiction: Television Fiction in Europe. Report 2002*, ed. Milly Buonanno (Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory, 2002), 83–97; Rosa Álvarez Berciano, Charo Lacalle & Lorenzo Vilches, ‘Playing It Safe: Spanish Television Fiction in 1998’, in *Eurofiction: Television Fiction in Europe. Report 1999*, ed. Milly Buonanno (Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory, 1999), 106–23.

18 Hugh O’Donnell, ‘High Drama, Low Key: Visual Aesthetics and Subject Positions in the Domestic Spanish Television Serial’, in *New Approaches to Spanish Television, Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, 8:1 (2007), 37–54 (p. 40).

*telenovela*.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, the long-running serial, like the soap opera, favours dialogue over action, gives prominence to domestic space, and is open-ended (to allow for adaptation to audience response).

### Evolution of the Serial Format in Spain

Our research into the production of serial fiction television in Spain between 1990 and 2010 has allowed us to define four distinct stages, which summarize the evolution of this format. In the first stage (1990–1995) Spanish television channels opted for co-productions with Latin-American countries and with Italy, where Latin-American *telenovelas* were also very popular in the 1980s.<sup>20</sup> The second stage (1996–1999) is characterized by the consolidation of homegrown serials that are more indebted to UK soap operas like *EastEnders* (BBC1, 1985–) and *Coronation Street* (ITV, 1960–) than to Latin-American *telenovelas*. While the third period (2000–2003) drew on a combination of these homegrown adaptations, with co-productions and original productions, and formats inspired by the classic *telenovelas*. Lastly, the fourth stage (2004–2010) was marked by a shift towards the serial comedy (generally adaptations of Latin-American *telenovelas*) and the launch of the remarkably successful historical drama serial *Amar en tiempos revueltos*.

Table 1  
Homegrown Serials (1990–2010)<sup>21</sup>

Title	Channel	Countries of Production	Start	End
<i>El oro y el barro</i>	Antena3	Spain	16/9/91	31/12/91
<i>La loba herida</i>	Tele5	Spain, Venezuela	1/7/92	30/12/92
<i>Dime Luna</i>	La2	Spain, Brazil, Switzerland, Italy	1/7/93	7/8/93
<i>Yedra</i>	TVE1	Spain, Italy	5/7/93	11/2/94
<i>Vecinos</i>	Antena3	Spain	1/2/94	3/3/94
<i>El Súper, historias de todos los días</i>	Tele5	Spain	6/9/96	31/12/99

19 Miguel Sabido & Rubén Jara, 'Marco teórico de las telenovelas mexicanas', *Chasqui. Revista Latinoamericana de Comunicación*, 31 (1989), 24–31.

20 Milly Buonanno, 'The Sense of Becoming Italian: TV Fiction in 1999', in *Eurofiction: Television Fiction in Europe. Report 2000*, ed. Milly Buonanno (Strasbourg: European Audiovisual Observatory, 2000), 91–110; and Milly Buonanno, *Italian Drama & Beyond: Stories from the Soil, Stories from the Sea* (Bristol/New York: Intellect, 2012).

21 The regional public channels began producing serials in 1994 with *Poblenou* (TV3), about the daily life of a group of people living in the Barcelona district of the same name, a dramatic serial which comes much closer to British soap operas than to Latin-American *telenovelas*. Antena3 broadcast the programme, dubbed into Spanish, in 1996 under the title *Los mejores años*.

Title	Channel	Countries of Production	Start	End
<i>Calle Nueva</i>	TVE1	Spain	28/9/97	30/6/200
<i>Ambiciones</i>	Antena3	Spain	14/9/98	27/10/98
<i>El secreto</i>	TVE1	Spain, Mexico	22/1/01	31/12/01
<i>Esencia de poder</i>	Tele5	Spain	25/6/01	14/12/01
<i>La verdad de Laura</i>	TVE1	Spain, Mexico	2/1/02	5/7/02
<i>Géminis, venganza de amor</i>	TVE1	Spain	30/9/02	4/7/03
<i>Luna negra</i>	TVE1	Spain	29/9/03	6/5/04
<i>La sopa boba</i>	Antena3	Spain	24/5/04	3/12/04
<i>Amar en tiempos revueltos</i>	TVE1	Spain	27/9/05	16/11/12
<i>El auténtico Rodrigo Leal</i>	Antena3	Spain	29/8/05	21/10/05
<i>Yo soy Bea</i>	Tele5	Spain	10/6/06	16/8/09
<i>Cafetería Manhattan</i>	Antena3	Spain	12/3/07	13/4/07
<i>Lalola</i>	Antena3	Spain	6/7/08	26/1/09
<i>Mi gemela es hija única</i>	Tele5	Spain	9/12/08	1/3/09
<i>Los exitosos Pells</i>	Cuatro	Spain	7/9/09	15/9/09
<i>Somos cómplices</i>	Antena3	Spain	15/9/09	17/9/09
<i>Valientes</i>	Cuatro	Spain	25/1/10	26/2/10

### The First Serials Made in Spain (1990–1994)

The early 1990s brought to an end Spain's state television monopoly and saw the transition from an almost 'do-it-yourself' form of television production to the gradual establishment of a production industry. It was during this period, marked by the large number of Spanish productions and viewer ratings battles, that the independent channels made three forays into the serial: *El oro y el barro* (Antena3, 1991), *Vecinos* (Antena3, 1994) and *La loba herida* (Tele5, 1992), adding to TVE's *Dime Luna* and *Yedra*.

In spite of their similarities in theme and characterization, TVE's serials were noticeably different from those produced by the independent channels that began broadcasting in 1989 under the Ley de Televisión Privada of 1988. Thus, *Dime Luna*, *Yedra* and *La loba herida* had structural and formal standards similar to Mexican and Venezuelan *telenovelas*, whereas *El oro y el barro*, an Argentine co-production with Antena3 included numerous scenes shot on location.<sup>22</sup> *Vecinos*, on the other hand, was a daily broadcast comedy set in a group of newly built dwellings. With regard to scheduling, the introduction of the local serial format meant that Latin-American *telenovelas*—until that point aired on TVE1 and the new private

---

22 *El oro y el barro* received the Martín Fierro award, Argentina's highest accolade for radio and television programmes.

channels Antena3 and Tele5—were moved to the morning schedule or to the second channels.<sup>23</sup>

### Soap Operas and the *telenovelas* (1996–1999)

Disappointing initial audience ratings prompted state television channels not to release any serials in 1995. However, from 1996 onwards, TVE1 and Tele5, taking advantage of previous experience in co-productions, opted for a homegrown format, with themes closer to the daily lives of their viewers, a larger ensemble cast and a firm commitment to *costumbrismo*. The structure emulated the English-language soap opera format currently enjoying popular success on TV3, the Catalan regional channel and the Basque ETB1: channels that had swapped the more melodramatic Latin-American *telenovela* for the realism of the British soap<sup>24</sup> and moved towards the long-running serial narrative extended by changing characters and plots as appropriate, and facilitated by a new weekly shooting system that allowed for the adaptation of scripts to current events and audience taste. According to O'Donnell, characteristics of the soap opera tradition that were adapted to the Basque and Catalan context included:

Limited camera and lens movements, predominantly eye-level shooting, relatively sedate editing, a more or less complete absence of 'tampering' with narrative time, and a refusal whether conscious or otherwise of the artful or the symbolic.<sup>25</sup>

The creolization of narrative structures, which is also found in other European serials of the period,<sup>26</sup> is one of the most relevant characteristics of the Spanish melodramatic serials of the second stage, which began with *El Súper, historias de todos los días* (Tele5, 1996–1999), an Estudios Picasso production featuring a young supermarket check-out girl who goes on to become a co-owner after it is revealed that the girl's mother actually owns the supermarket. The programme's success, with over 738 episodes, not only provided a boost in the production of serials in Spain, but also established a canon, both in terms of a narrative structure that focuses on a female protagonist who stands out from the rest of the ensemble cast, and for progressive hybridization with other genres, such as the crime drama or thriller. The influence of the *telenovela* is also evident in the opulence,

---

23 José María Álvarez Monzoncillo & Javier López Villanueva, 'La producción de ficción en España: un cambio de ciclo', *ZER. Revista de Estudios de Comunicación*, 7 (1999), 65–87; and Chicharro, 'Historia de la telenovela en España'.

24 See O'Donnell, 'High Drama, Low Key'.

25 O'Donnell, 'High Drama, Low Key', 37.

26 See Buonanno, 'The Sense of Becoming Italian: TV Fiction in 1999'.

power and success that envelop some of the prototypical themes of the serial format, such as secrecy, betrayal and lies,<sup>27</sup> but without excluding the *costumbrismo* so deeply rooted in the local romantic drama.

The series produced during this second stage gained admirable viewing figures. *El Súper, historias de todos los días* (Tele5, 1996–1999), for example, started out with a share of 26.7% that increased to around 32%, and even over 40% on two occasions. These ratings allowed the serial to run for another three seasons, although its audience gradually declined to 15.6% for the final episode. The more realist and *costumbrista* *Calle Nueva* (TVE1, 1997–2000) included a more ensemble cast than *El Súper* and focused on daily life in a working-class district of Madrid and a middle-aged housewife protagonist. It also earned good viewer ratings despite an initially timid reception (1,154,500 viewers [c.13.4%]), bringing in averages of 21% and 22% in the first and second seasons respectively. The 20% share of the third season led the channel's programmers to cancel it, leaving it unfinished.

Antena3 also produced its own serial, *Ambiciones* (1998), although this one took its cue from the orthodox Latin-American *telenovela*, with a history of power, intrigue and love between two families. The script, by the acclaimed romantic novelist Corín Tellado, received no interest from the public and the programme was cancelled after fifty-three episodes.

### **Co-productions and Adaptations of Latin-American *telenovelas* (2000–2003)**

The third stage ushered in a mixed system of Spanish in-house productions and co-productions with adaptations of Latin-American *telenovelas*. Tele5 launched *Esencia de poder*, a conventional drama originally devised to fill the private channel's summer schedule. The serial's popularity, with some 20% of the audience share and an average of two million viewers, saw it extended until December of the same year, even though viewer ratings had already dropped to 10% in November. With its themes of love, family, ambition and power relations, *Esencia de poder* marked a clear return to the intrigues of the Mexican and Venezuelan *telenovelas*, although some innovations were introduced, such as changing the lead characters in each of the three parts of the serial and dropping the characteristic happy ending.

That same year, the state channel TVE1 successfully re-assigned the after-lunch slot to a classic *telenovela*, co-produced with Mexico: *El secreto* (2001), an adaptation of the *telenovela* *Retrato de familia* (Univisión, 1995–1996), was a huge success, with an average share of 25% and some three

---

27 *Telenovela, ficción popular y mutaciones culturales*, ed. Lucrecia Escudero & Eliseo Verón (Barcelona: Gedisa, 1997); and Nora Mazziotti, 'Telenovela Heroines', *ReVista. Harvard Review of Latin America*, 17:1 (2017), 9–12.

million viewers. It prompted TVE1 to embark on a new co-production with the Mexican channel Televisa: *La verdad de Laura* (2002), a loose adaptation of the Mexican production *Cuna de lobos* (Canal de las Estrellas, 1986–1987), was watched by 3,621,000 viewers. As with *La loba herida* and *El secreto*, *La verdad de Laura* follows the parameters of both the Mexican romantic *telenovelas* (in keeping with the Televisa productions hallmark) and the Venezuelan ones, the central plot-line is pervaded by a sense of ‘Christian morality’, according to which lead characters may redeem themselves through suffering and determination in a narrative arc that depends on two female characters, who embody good and evil respectively.<sup>28</sup> The series also follows certain criteria to do with class and/or gender conflict, focusing on everyday situations and without politicizing the public sphere.<sup>29</sup>

The success of *El secreto* and *La verdad de Laura* prompted TVE to commission the production company behind these two series, Europroducciones, to produce a series of its own. In line with these earlier adaptations, *Luna negra* (2003–2004) is also based on an original script by Susana Prieto, with a classical serial-inspired central plot revolving around the romantic relationship of the leading couple and the inclusion of distinctive elements to do with mystery, esotericism and superstition. Whilst it did not match the audience ratings of its predecessors, the series did achieve a reasonable average of 24.7% (2,578,000 viewers).

TVE’s next serial, *Géminis, venganza de amor* (2002), is loosely based on the Venezuelan *telenovela* *La dama de rosa* (RCTV, 1986–1987), with a main storyline—in addition to themes of love, revenge and betrayal—that concerns the lead character’s loss of innocence. Although set in Madrid, *Géminis, venganza de amor* follows a plot more in keeping with the classical Venezuelan *telenovelas*, where a poor and innocent girl falls for a wealthy man and must overcome a series of adversities and unfair accusations before marrying her Prince Charming after becoming pregnant. This was therefore another successful *telenovela* adapted to the Spanish market, with a 26.6% share of the audience.

### Format Renewal (2004–2010)

The fourth period analysed begins with the first comedy serial, *La sopa boba* (2004), a Miramón Mendi production for Antena3, written by the scriptwriters of the successful comedy series *Aquí no hay quién viva* (Antena3, 2003–2006), which ran for two seasons despite its modest audience rating of 15% (12.5% for

---

28 Nora Mazziotti, ‘La telenovela y su hegemonía en Latinoamérica’, *La Mirada de Telemo*, 1 (2008); available at <<http://repositorio.pucp.edu.pe/index/handle/123456789/20259>> (accessed 25 October 2017).

29 Guillermo Orozco, ‘La telenovela en México: ¿de una expresión cultural a un simple producto para la mercadotecnia?’, *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 6 (2006), 11–35.

the last episode). *La sopa boba* is set in a financially ruined hotel where a newly-divorced middle-aged woman (played by singer Lolita) sets up home with her children. Unlike comedy series such the aforementioned *Aquí no hay quien viva*, this serial delivers a dead-pan style of humour and resorts to some easier resources in constructing the characters and their relationships than those of drama serials. For example, it features ‘flat’ archetypes such as the leading female protagonist (Lola), an energetic single portrayed with significant gender stereotypes, and a group of lazy, inept, disastrous and selfish male sub-characters. Moreover, it features young children in more dominant roles, a rarity in Spanish serials, and features more professional female than male characters.

The fourth period, which marked the Spanish serial’s coming of age, was initially characterized by an absence of co-productions and a move towards the production of adaptation of comic serials, based on some successful Colombian *telenovelas* which mixed drama and comedy. Hence, on the heels of *La sopa boba*, Antena3, Tele5 and Cuatro produced nine comedies, aired daily, that, with the exception of the dramedy *Yo soy Bea*, adapted from the Colombian *telenovela* *Yo soy Betty la fea* (RCN, 1999–2001) failed to achieve good viewer ratings. Only TVE1 continued producing the serial drama, with an innovative, homegrown production, *Amar en tiempos revueltos* (2005–2012), which enjoyed a hugely positive response and, portrayed life in Madrid from the end of the Second Republic until 1957. The programme proved so successful that it ran for six seasons, with an average audience of 2,095,000 tuning in to the first season, giving it 20.9% of the audience share. Although this fell slightly in the second (15.8%) and third (18.9%) seasons, its viewership stayed above 20% in the three last seasons and even rose to 23.7% in the last.

*Amar en tiempos revueltos* was influenced by the highly-acclaimed Catalan serial *Temps de silenci* (TV3, 2001–2002) and made by the same production company (Diagonal TV). Set, like its predecessor, in the Spanish Civil War and postwar period, it adapts historical memory to this format with interpollated archive footage. The *costumbrista* setting uses personal and emotional relationships as the centrepiece for a story with a pedagogical aim. This didactic intention is revealed in the historical accounts and social and class conflicts, as well as in the values transmitted via direct connection with the present where the ideologically left-wing characters defend a way of life and political structure similar to those of Spain in the early twenty-first century.<sup>30</sup> It boasts an ensemble cast to portray the social

---

30 Ana María Castillo Hinojosa, Núria Simelio Solà & María Jesús Ruiz Muñoz, ‘La reconstrucción del pasado reciente a través de la narrativa televisiva: estudio comparativo de los casos de Chile y España’, *Revista Comunicación*, 10:1 (2012), 666–81.

and sentimental chronicle of a dark period by recreating the social and personal difficulties of its protagonists. However, despite highlighting the harsh social conditions and the political injustices of the Franco dictatorship, the serial barely scratches the surface of the political situation of the time, and unlike the successful series *Cuéntame cómo pasó* (TVE1, 2001), it does not reference any specific historical event. Nevertheless, the differences in social class, the portrayal of working-class life and the ideology of the characters represented an important innovation in Spanish serials.

The recurrent linking of political-fictional plots in *Amar en tiempos revueltos* inspired by the ideological and social context of the period, featuring male characters, and focusing on personal or family plots, featuring female characters, so characteristic of the serial format, is offset by the generally more positive depiction of the latter. Thus, the women are tough and provide for their families; they are more flexible, rational and responsive than the men in their acceptance of ideological stances at odds with their own. What is more, they embody highly innovative traits for the period represented, through the inclusion of two single mothers, a widow, married women who leave their spouses, and a lesbian couple. In general, the more positive characters defend a republican stance that is portrayed in terms of justice, equality, idealism and freedom.<sup>31</sup>

The independent channels' attempt at a dramedy, a cross-over between drama and comedy received a mixed reaction from Spanish viewers. As noted earlier, with the exception of *Yo soy Bea*, these failed to appeal to the audience, underscoring and further defining the Colombian *telenovela* as a unique global phenomenon, which led to adaptations in the international market. *Yo soy Bea* was the fictional serial-sitcom hybrid to draw the largest audience of the period analysed, leading the national ranking in 99.3% of its broadcasts (a 31.4% share in its first season) and even surpassing eight million viewers (42.1%) on the day of Bea's transformation from ugly to beautiful, broadcast on 8 June 2008. Just like the original Colombian format, the Tele5 serial tells the universal and time-honoured tale of the 'ugly duckling' in a comic tone that focuses on a highly intelligent, good and brilliant, yet not conventionally attractive, woman who succeeds in becoming beautiful and marrying her Prince Charming.

Fernando Gaitán's *Yo soy Betty la fea* highlights the global potential of the serial format, given the success of its twenty-eight adaptations produced in as many countries; some of them as far removed from Colombia's cultural and social sphere as India, Germany, the Philippines, Turkey, China, Vietnam

---

31 María del Mar Chicharro-Merayo & José Carlos Rueda-Laffond, 'Televisión y ficción histórica: *Amar en tiempos revueltos*', *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 21:2 (2008), 57–84.

and Russia. In short, it is clear that Betty's problems (social, economic, ethnic and gender differences) are universal. Indeed, the adaptations of the Colombian serial showed the process whereby narrative references find parallels in new cultural systems. Thus, in Spain the histrionics and the social and sexual differences of the Colombian characters of the original *telenovela* are tempered to construct a more credible and politically correct story,<sup>32</sup> while the North American Betty is the daughter of Mexican immigrants and 'su fealdad es construida a partir de sus rasgos étnicos'<sup>33</sup> as well as in her 'look étnico-kitsch'.<sup>34</sup>

However, none of the later serial comedies produced in Spain achieved the success of *Yo soy Bea*. Hence, the adaptation of the Chilean *telenovela Amores de mercado* (TVN, 2001), *Mi gemela es hija única* (Tele5, 2008–2009) peaked at 11% and then fell to 4.8% in the morning schedule to which it had been moved. The serial draws on a hackneyed storyline about adopted twins separated at birth who, brought up in opposing socio-economic backgrounds, are reunited as adults and decide to swap their respective lives.

Antena3's adaptations of Colombian, Chilean and Argentine *telenovelas* likewise obtained disappointing ratings. The broadcaster's adaptation of the Colombian *El auténtico Rodrigo Leal* (Antena3, 2005) received an average share of only 13.1%, which led to it being dropped after seventy-six episodes. The first serial in Spain to have a male leading role, it assumes the tone and narrative strategies of the comedy, and its bid to parody the reality shows, particularly the Tele5 hit since 2000 *Gran hermano*, marks a departure in plot and contents from the traditional romantic *telenovela* drama.

The Argentine adaptation *Lalola* (Antena3, 2008–2009) debuted with a 16.2% share that steadily fell, to end in January 2009 with less than 10%. The serial was novel in that it introduced elements of fantasy into a plot that signified a certain transgression from a gender perspective. *Lalola* begins with the conversion of the male protagonist—a womanizer and a misogynist—into a woman, by means of a spell that forces him to experience, at first hand, the gender prejudices that condition women's daily lives. The Chilean adaptation *Somos cómplices* (Antena3, 2009), a romantic comedy serial based on a story of love and ambition, performed even more poorly, and was pulled from the schedule after only two episodes, having achieved a 6.8% and 5.7% share respectively. Finally, an innovative

---

32 Charo Lacalle, 'Yo soy Bea: un ejemplo de migración cultural', *DeSignis. Publicación de la Federación Latinoamericana de Semiótica*, 23 (2015), 157–70.

33 Sandra L. Murillo Sandoval & Luis Escala Rabadán, 'De Betty, la fea a Ugly Betty: circulación y adaptación de narrativas televisivas', *Cuadernos Info*, 33 (2013), 99–112 (p. 100).

34 Maria Pia Pozzato, 'Camp Betty, un caso interesante para la semiótica de las culturas', *DeSignis. Publicación de la Federación Latinoamericana de Semiótica*, 23 (2015), 147–56 (p. 149).

move to produce a comedy serial so closely based on current affairs that scripts were produced the same day as transmission, *Cafeteria Manhattan* (Antena3, 2007), failed to achieve the expected success (11.7% on its debut) and was withdrawn after nineteen episodes.

Following the enactment of the Ley 10/2005, de 14 de junio [de 2005], de Medidas Urgentes para el Impulso de la Televisión Digital Terrestre, de Liberalización de la Televisión por Cable y de Fomento del Pluralismo, the new private channels Cuatro and LaSexta began broadcasting in 2005 and 2006 respectively and started to produce serials that had little impact. Cuatro initially opted for comedy serials, which received meagre audience ratings. Later, in 2009, it launched the romantic comedy *Los exitosos Pells* (Telefe, 2008), an Argentine adaptation about a news channel, which was pulled from the schedule after only seven episodes, with a 3.9% share (465,000 viewers). In 2010, Cuatro made a second attempt with *Valientes*, another Argentine adaptation (Canal 13, 2009), based on a story of revenge involving four brothers. However, its audience share fell to 3% and the programme was cancelled after forty-five episodes.

## Conclusions

Regardless of its success or failure with audiences, the most noteworthy characteristic of the serial format that facilitated its 'indigenization'<sup>35</sup> is the flexibility with which it lends itself to different national contexts, narratives, aesthetics and codes, and genres (drama, comedy, historical, youth etc.). This is a trend constructed and developed by producers and screenwriters, as well as by the interpretation of an audience whose preferences are largely determined by their cultural, national and linguistic proximity.<sup>36</sup> Consider, for example, the differences and similarities of the national adaptations of the Colombian *telenovela Yo soy Betty, la fea*,<sup>37</sup> as well as the role of some serials in the construction of national identity.<sup>38</sup>

---

35 See Buonanno, 'La masa y el relleno'.

36 Antonio C. La Pastina & Joseph D. Straubhaar, 'Multiple Proximities between Television Genres and Audiences: The Schism between Telenovelas' Global Distribution and Local Consumption', *International Communication Gazette*, 67:3 (2005), 271–88.

37 See Lothar Mikos & Marta Perrotta, 'Traveling Style: Aesthetic Differences and Similarities in National Adaptations of *Yo soy Betty, la fea*', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15:1 (2012), 81–97; Lacalle, '*Yo soy Bea*: un ejemplo de migración cultural'; and Pozzato, 'Camp Betty'.

38 Charo Lacalle, 'Ficción televisiva y construcción de identidad cultural: el caso catalán', *Opción. Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales*, 23:52 (2007), 61–71; Enric Castelló, 'Dramatizing Proximity: Cultural and Social Discourses in Soap Operas from Production to Reception', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13:2 (2010), 207–23; and María del Mar Chicharro, 'Telenovelas and Society: Constructing and Reinforcing the Nation through Television Fiction', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16:2 (2013), 211–25.

However, within the logic of the transnationalization of the serial format<sup>39</sup> and, at the same time, of its proximity to regional markets, we should add other factors of an economic and commercial nature, which demand very generalist products to please the international audience.<sup>40</sup> Concurrently, the need to adapt them to linguistic characteristics, scenarios and cultural aspects to attract local audiences<sup>41</sup> determines the setting of serials in other spheres, such as the political system and the historical context.<sup>42</sup> In this sense, it is worth recalling that the consolidation of democracy in Spain, after Franco's death in 1975, and the successive governments of the PSOE (1982–1990), led to a process of renewal of the themes of fiction with the inclusion of issues barely touched on until then, such as women's liberation, sexuality or the recovery of historical memory. These themes eventually went on to form the backbone of the stories developed in the Spanish serials of the twenty-first century.

The present paper illustrates the extent to which soap operas and *telenovelas* exercised both structural and textual influence. Thus, annual planning, and daily shooting, editing and production processes inherited from soap operas have all influenced the increase in pace of the serial,<sup>43</sup> which in turn has translated into greater flexibility in production processes to adapt as quickly as possible to audience response, including—as indicated above—dropping series that did not meet with public approval. Regarding content, soap opera-influenced serials tend to be more realistic and to construct a portrait of their characters' daily lives in a *costumbrista*, almost ethnographic way.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, even though love stories are essential to any serial format, they do not—unlike *telenovelas*—form the main plot. In addition, the characters in Spanish serial dramas tend to be less stereotyped and play a greater diversity of social roles than those of their Latin-American counterparts. Finally, it is worth highlighting the characteristic repetition and redundancy of the traditional daily broadcast serial which is designed to ease the viewer's integration at whatever point in the story they tune in.<sup>45</sup> The success of *El Súper* (Tele5, 1996–1999) and *Calle Nueva* (TVE1, 1997–2000) illustrate this dynamic, linking the *telenovela* with the tradition of the English-speaking soap opera introduced in the Spanish market by Catalan

---

39 See Mazziotti, 'Telenovela Heroines'.

40 Daniel Mato, 'The Transnationalization of the Telenovela Industry, Territorial References, and the Production of Markets and Representations of Transnational Identities', *Television & New Media*, 6:4 (2005), 423–44.

41 Viviana Rojas & Juan Piñón, 'Spanish, English or Spanglish? Media Strategies and Corporate Struggles to Reach the Second and Later Generations of Latinos', *Journal of Hispanic Media*, 7 (2014), 1–15.

42 Marc Ferro, *Cine e historia* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1980), 80.

43 See Álvarez & López 'La producción de ficción en España'.

44 See Chicharro 'Historia de la telenovela en España'.

45 Martín Barbero 'Televisión, melodrama y vida cotidiana', 71.

public television (Televisió de Catalunya [TVC]).<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the greatest achievements between 1990 and 2010, such as *Yo soy Bea* or *Amar en tiempos revueltos*, are still much closer to soap operas than to *telenovelas*.

To conclude, Spanish television fiction has entered the digital age working actively to build transnational audiences for products<sup>47</sup> that extend beyond serials to incorporate external cultures and subcultures into local television. This, in turn, has paved the way for the transformation of the product into a local serial format. This paper shows that this transformation took place at the point between television deregulation and the introduction of private television into the digital age (1990–2010), by combining and adapting the themes of the *telenovela* with the narrative structures of the soap opera to the local context. A singular adaptation, that reinterprets and brings up to date Spanish local serial into the new scenarios of the digital age.\*

---

46 Unlike *telenovelas*, geographical location and cultural identity feature more prominently in soap operas than in the serial format. This is evident in *Poblenou* (TV3, 1994).

47 See Mato, 'The Transnationalization of the Telenovela Industry'.

\* Disclosure Statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.