

# Telenovelas and society: Constructing and reinforcing the nation through television fiction

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**Abstract**

This study focuses on certain aspects of the socialising function exerted by the medium of television. More specifically, it examines in detail some of the televisual strategies used by Spanish public television to reinforce the idea of Spain as 'state' and 'nation'. To achieve this, the study analyses two telenovelas produced in Spain, *La Señora (The Lady)* and *Amar en tiempos revueltos (Loving in Troubled Times)*, which represent the adaptation of the genre to the cultural characteristics of its target audience. Although both series adhere to the principal rules of this melodramatic formula, they propose, in a similar way, an exercise of interpreting the country's recent history. They explain and interpret the past of this society, thus justifying the collective present day. The analysis of both texts allows us to identify some of the semantic keys used today by the television media to evoke and legitimate the idea of the Spanish nation.

**Keywords**

Socialisation function, Spain, telenovela, television

**Introduction**

The telenovela, a distinct subgenre of melodrama, is defined by a unique idiosyncrasy, differing from that of the soap opera of Anglo-Saxon origin. It is shaped by the limited nature of its episodes, the slot in which it is broadcast (prime time or the early afternoon) and the construction of its own system of stars, where the main actors can play different

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roles in different series yet maintain their credibility (Matelski, 1999). Furthermore, the telenovela's central theme is romantic love, which is materialised in numerous conflicts and difficulties in achieving a sentimental goal (Gómez, 1996). The structuring of the main plot revolves around a love triangle in which two women confront each other for the affection of the same man (Klagsbrunn, 1993). It uses a Manichean presentation of good and evil, around which some of the characters are contrasted, especially the lead women (Roura, 1993).

This study examines the characteristics of the telenovela genre in depth, as well as highlighting some of its tendencies to change. It begins with the assumption that the boundaries of the genre are difficult to define, since it is a 'living formula'. This model has evolved to create products in which characters are less predictable and stereotypical. In addition, themes have broadened from the strictly personal ones to refer now to audiences' social concerns and culture (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003). Moreover, its adaptation to the cultural idiosyncrasies of non-Latin American audiences explains in part the broad variety of scripts and formats contained in the genre. The needs of the audiovisual industry, the media context and the tastes of the public have left their mark on the evolution of these tales.

Furthermore, this study assumes that telenovela discourse provides audiences with interpretative frameworks which can be used in an affective or even an informative way. Television fiction can help people deal with personal experiences and relationships, as well as provide information and orientation about public issues. These products can contribute to linking past and present, connecting the audience emotionally around the portrayal of their shared origins and historical achievements (Rodríguez Cadena, 2004). Hence, we understand that some of these formats can straighten social cohesion processes. The references to a common language, a shared territory, to the history and customs of a people as well as social concerns, can be used in the context of television fiction to evoke in the viewer the idea of belonging to one shared nation. Television fiction can be used as a story in which people of the same ethnic origin, with the same language and traditions (nation), can be reflected and feel recognised.

The present discussion begins by highlighting some of the main tendencies that have shaped a genre which is undergoing a constant process of renewal. These range from the transnationalisation of the genre to its adaptation to localised audiences. The next part of the text focuses on these secondary processes by examining how fiction in general, and the telenovela in particular, can recreate the cultural features of a society and review its history. In this sense, the tale can emphasise not only the cultural proximity of the viewers as a whole but also their shared past, encompassing social, political and even armed conflict (social differences, political polarisation, war) as well as social achievements and improvements (industrialisation, modernisation, economic growth). Following from there, the text focuses on the analysis of relationships between some products of television fiction and their representation of contemporary history and society in the Spanish case. It will then concentrate on the study of two home-grown telenovelas which present the historical development of Spanish society through fiction, and refer to this as a process of strengthening the conception and image of Spain as one nation. Through a close reading of these television series, this study identifies some of the elements used in each story's portrayal of Spanish society. The

qualitative analysis of the characters, scenes, issues, plots, periods and events reflected allows us to study in depth the representation of Spain as a unique nation comprising several regions, as formulated in these televisual texts.

## Fiction and community

In the current stage in the evolution of the telenovela, stories have become increasingly complex. The number of plots in the tale increases, characters are given greater psychological complexity and conflicts are more ambiguous, blurring the boundary between good and bad (Streimberg, 1996). This tendency also can be seen on the strictly semantic level. In this sense, in their attempt to generate transnational products, some Latin American productions have nuanced aspects of the story that deal with identity, such as the portrayal of the masculine role and more commonly, the feminine role. Stereotypes of femininity retain some indispensable basic preconditions in the genre (i.e. romanticism, valuation of the family), but they reveal attitudes which are more provocative and less submissive (Casas Pérez, 2005).

Intertextual influences can be perceived in the genre's evolution and transnationalisation. In addition to the influx of other fiction formulae (such as comedies or stories of intrigue), the informative products broadcast on television and even in the press make their presence felt in the telenovela. Milly Buonanno (1993) highlights the links between the reality captured by the informative news media, and that constructed through fiction. The 'news' becomes a relevant criterion in the choice of subject matter and fictional characters. In this way, 'journalistic news values', which dictate the organisation of newspapers and bulletins, also influence fictional stories. Some of the criteria in the construction of fictional stories are the geographical, cultural and temporal proximities of the plot, the general interest of the subject matter, the high status of the protagonists, and repetition in different senses (through the actors, imitation, adaptation or connection with a previous text). 'Journalistic new values' dictate partially the selection in new fictional items (Buonanno, 1993).

Particularly illuminating is the study carried out by Antonio La Pasquina (2004), who analyses *The Cattle King* (SIC, 1996–1997), a work of fiction which references the journalistic current affairs and political discourse of contemporary Brazil. The story referenced such thorny issues as the conflict over land ownership, recreating the landless workers' movement and the tension with landlords. Land reform was devised as a means of resolving these structural conflicts. Reception of this message would require knowledge of the related journalistic texts in order to decode the intertextual references. In the Brazilian case, other products in the field of melodrama such as *Terra Nostra* (*Our Land*, TV Globo, 1999–2000) have confirmed the idea that viewing fiction products can be considered a dimension of public life: it may supply the viewer with frameworks of analysis on the immediate political reality. In this way, it can act as an educational text that teaches about the past and the present, playing an important 'role of orientation' when it comes to interpreting current affairs (Porto, 2005).

This is only one of several effects that the telenovela can have upon its audience. Studies about reception make clear its impact on emotions, attitudes, self-perception and a sense of belonging to a group (Brown, 2009; Leal, 1988; Porto, 2005; Tufte,

2000). It can serve to weave significant links with the reference community. Specifically, for Latin Americans who are resident in the USA, the consumption of telenovelas is a sign of Latin culture, beyond the cultural portrait offered by the text in terms of its language, territory, religion and so forth (Barbera and Bielby, 2001). In the same way, significant works point out how the young generation of Mexican immigrants in the USA understand the viewing of telenovelas as a cultural practice linked to their ethnic 'baggage', which becomes a substitute for a direct relationship with their autochthonous space (Mayer, 2003).

This is true to such an extent that North-American producers themselves have come to consider the rules proposed by the telenovela as a means of positioning their products closer to the growing Latin American audience. Popular soap operas such as *Port Charles* (ABC, 1997–2003) have adapted their broadcasts by shortening episodes. *The Bold and the Beautiful* (CBS, 1987–) has not only introduced a Latino character, Antonio, thus refreshing its stereotypes in a multicultural direction, but also allows the viewer to follow the series in Spanish if they wish. Thus the programme follows in the wake of *Days of Our Lives* (NBC, 1965–) and *Passions* (NBC, 1999–2007), which previously opted to subtitle the dialogue in Spanish (Bielby and Harrington, 2005).

However, the use of the telenovela formula extends beyond Latin American audiences. Mediterranean countries in particular have incorporated this format into their homegrown television productions and schedules. Even so, the rules and content of the genre have been adapted ('indigenised') according to the cultural particularities of each audience (Buonanno, 2006). Globalisation goes hand-in-hand with processes of localisation ('glocalisation'). Hence, the imported conventions and genres are adapted to the characteristics of particular audiences (Robertson, 1995). Language, history, territory and religion are some of the elements that highlight the cultural proximity between the plot and its potential audiences (Straubhaar, 1991, 1998).

The representation of cultural elements such as folklore, music, gastronomy, dress codes, rituals and so forth, is yet another way of recreating a community (Castelló, 2009). Thus, the discourse of fiction can be used by political powers to promote the local language and the autochthonous culture of a region or nation. By exalting shared customs and traditions, highlighting social concerns (such as unemployment, crime, lack of safety, drugs, financial hardship, inequality) and values of multiculturalism and coexistence, tales can develop a socialisation or ideological function (Castelló, 2007). They show on the screen what a nation is, by way of language and tradition.

The use of television fiction as a vehicle through which collective identities can be constituted and reinforced has been well documented in several studies. For example, Hilde Van den Bulck (2001) points out how the programme contents and schedules of Flemish public television between 1953 and 1969 promoted the interests of political powers concerning the construction of a regional identity. The quantitative importance of domestic production, the consideration given to the news or the presentation of autochthonous art, culture, entertainment and folklore, together with the growing presence of educational content, are some of the televisual strategies employed. The objective is the broadcast of homogeneous and civic communal values. Similarly, Judith Franco (2001) analyses the components of local colour present in the Flemish homegrown community

soap *Thuis* (*At Home*, VRT, 1996–), an adaptation of the popular *Eastenders* (BBC, 1985–). *Thuis* airs images about Flemish identity through its portrayal of class, genre, ethnicity, sexuality and region. The use of informal standardised language, realistic representation of their own traditions, the use of local television stars and the evocation of conservative and rural values, are some of the strategies used to exalt autochthonous culture. In the same way, Griffiths (1993) highlights how the series *Pobol y Cwm* (*People of the Valley*, BBC Wales, 1974–1982) broadcast in Wales, reinforces Welsh identity by making use of comedy and representing the image of the Welsh in opposition to the English.

The presence of regional language appears to play a significant role in the portrayal of identities. Larfhlaith Watson (2002) highlights how the Irish channel TG4, which broadcasts part of its programmes in Irish, has been able to construct an environment in which Irish speakers come together and form communities, despite their geographical dispersion. Through these products, this channel creates a space of public participation for the speakers of this language. O'Donnell (2002) has documented how in the case of Scotland (*Machair*, Gaelic/Scottish TV, 1993–1999), Ireland (*Ros na Rún*, TG4, 1996–) and the Basque Country (*Goenkale [Upper Street]*, ETB1, 1994–), the portrayal of a regional identity in fictional tales can lead to the extreme visibility of the autochthonous language, giving it an excessive prominence. Therefore, this recreation is not very representative of real usage, as in reality, use of the language is among a smaller minority than the tale reflects.

Other studies of a transnational and comparative nature emphasise the relevance of the use of their own language as a criterion through which the fiction's success can be predicted. For example, the great exporters of European fiction (Great Britain, Germany and France) find significant linguistic and cultural barriers for their products in neighbouring countries. At the same time, the relative success of homegrown productions in smaller national and regional markets, such as the Netherlands or the Flemish region, feeds the dynamic of indigenisation and favours the proliferation of, and competition within, this type of product. In countries such as Switzerland and Sweden, as well as in other regional linguistic communities, the protection of their own cultural identity is used as the ideological justification for this trend (Biltereyst, 1992).

## Fiction and cultural identity in the Spanish case

In the case of Spain, certain fictional tales, some of them telenovelas, are associated with the promotion of distinctive regional cultures. Indeed, the public regional channels (i.e. Catalanian TV3, Basque ETB, Galician TVG)<sup>1</sup> have served as a platform for the creation of homegrown products which exalt the cultural idiosyncrasies of their specific audience. In this sense, through their own television channels the different regional governments seek to depart from the notion of a unique and compact Spanish culture, fostering the recognition of their autonomous history, language, culture and their own share of political power. In certain areas of the country, such as Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque Country, these signals reflect the importance of nationalist and even secessionist movements, seeking political independence and autonomous economic organisation for the region.

Examples of regional television telenovelas include pioneering Catalan series such as *Poble Nou* (*New Village*, TV3, 1994), *Nissaga de Poder* (*Dynasty of Power*, TV3, 1996–1998), *Ventdelplà* (TV3, 2005–); the Galician series, *Compostela, Sol e Lúa* (*Compostela, Sun and Moon*, TVG, 1993), *Rias Baixas* (TVG, 2005–); the Valencian *A Flor de Pell* (*Skin Deep*, 1996, Canal 9, 2002, Punt 2); the Basque *Goenkale* (*Upper Street*, ETB1, 1994–) and the Andalucian production *Arrayán* (Canal Sur, 2001–). In addition to the centrality of the linguistic and cultural component, there is expression of values such as coexistence, dialogue, agreement and negotiation and the importance of well-being, establishing the axiological guidelines for these series (O'Donnell, 1999).

Some other series, which have come to form part of the history of television in Spain, were directed toward a broader, countrywide audience, using the national generalist public channels (TVE 1, TVE 2)<sup>2</sup> as their platform. In some instances, the content of these programmes compared Spanish qualities to those of other foreign peoples, always favouring the natives. *Curro Jiménez* (TVE, 1976–1978) presented the story of a Spanish bandit in the 19th century who fights against the invasion of French army in the War of Independence. In other cases, programmes, often literary adaptations, depicted conflicting dimensions within Spanish society through the construction of *costumbrista* sketches<sup>3</sup> in a historical and dramatic tone: for example *Cañas y Barro* (*Reeds and Mud*, TVE, 1978) *La Barraca* (*The Cabin*, TVE, 1979) and *Los Gozos y las Sombras* (*Joy and Shadow*, TVE, 1982). In any case, all of these tales served the function of showing Spanish identity and culture in terms of unity. The evocation of regional particularities was shown as a particular attribute of a superior all-encompassing community, an indicator of Spanishness. Regional cultures are shown as part of the Spanish nation and never as something removed from Spanish culture.

Lately, telenovelas such as *La Señora* (*The Lady*, TVE 1, 2008–2010) and *Amar en tiempos revueltos* (*Loving in Troubled Times*, TVE 1, 2005–), broadcast on TVE 1 as well as on the international channel and the TVE website, reconstruct Spain's recent history through the experiences and emotions of a cast of characters that comprise a somewhat simplified social structure. Under the command of directors such as Lluís María Güell, Eduardo Casanova and Jordi Frades, these series exemplify *Españolización*, or the transformation of the Latin soap opera into something more Spanish in nature. Supported by a shared production and directing team (Diagonal TV, Endemol Group), organised according to the rules of the genre and using historical subject matter as a backdrop, they create an interpretative continuum around recent Spanish history.

Among both homegrown Spanish products we find ideological connections based on ties which are both syntactic and semantic. In this way, the two telenovelas converge in the space of televisual melodrama (the importance of romantic and emotional plots, complex structure or centrality of female characters, among others). However, above all, both series deal with associated themes and narrative resources through which they weave an explanatory storyline in relation to Spanish society and its evolution. Hence their horizontal intertextuality, based on the relationship in terms of genre and contents, leads us to assert the need to analyse both texts in a related way (Fiske, 1987).

Directed at the same target audience, the 39 episodes of *La Señora* were aired at the same time as *Amar en tiempos revueltos*. In fact, the promotional campaign for *La Señora* focused particularly intensively on the timeslot and the audience of *Amar en tiempos*



*revueltos*, and strongly emphasised their shared characteristics and the continuity between the two. Meanwhile, *Amar en tiempos revueltos*, which broadcasts daily, is already into its sixth season and has shown more than 1000 episodes. While *La Señora* is set in the Spain of the 1920s (the reign of King Alfonso XIII, Primo de Rivera's dictatorship, 1923–1930), *Amar en tiempos revueltos* takes the viewer first into the final stages of the Second Republic (1931–1936) and into the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), then later transports them through the Francoist dictatorship (1940s and 1950s). The backdrop of recent Spanish history serves to locate the web of romantic relationships which provide the framework of the televised stories.

The profitability of both series is beyond doubt. As early as its first season, *Amar en tiempos revueltos* achieved an average audience of nearly 2.1m, which corresponds to a 20.9 percent audience share (Gómez, 2007). Its audience, longevity and the production of various spin-offs, including *Flores para Belle* (*Flowers for Belle*, 2008), *¿Quién mató a Hipólito Roldán?* (*Who killed Hipólito Roldán?*, 2009) clearly indicate their popularity.

The exquisite and painstaking production of *La Señora* was followed by more than 3m viewers each week during its first season. In fact, the 13th episode beat its own record, gaining an audience share of 23.9 percent (average audience: 3.9 m).<sup>4</sup> It became the most watched programme on any channel, reaching an audience share of 30.7 percent at its peak and leading among men and women over 45 years old, regardless of social class or size of dwelling (Europapress, 2008).

The two series make equally simplified portrayals of the social dynamics of another time, which are limited to clearly defined chronological boundaries. The importance of a system of social stratification, in which the lower classes come up against the upper class; the representation of the political stage and ideological differences, showing a conflict between progressive and conservative groups; the recreation of the home and the proactive role given to leading female characters (i.e. Andrea in *Amar en tiempos revueltos* and Victoria in *La Señora*), are some of the indicators of their interpretative uniformity, which even establish intertextual citations.<sup>5</sup>

Lastly, in the exercise of their socialising function, they tend to reinforce the idea of Spain as a nation, based upon the common past and difficulties faced by the people. The evocation of a territory, showing of a language, portrayal of other cultural elements such as folklore, customs or history and the reference to current social concerns, are some of the elements that fiction uses to reinforce the feeling of identity and to legitimate the idea of a single Spanish nation (Castelló, 2009).

## Space and language in the evocation of identity

Given their intention to activate *Españolista*<sup>6</sup> identities, both tales make very careful choices as to the symbolic location in which their action takes place. The use of space aims to broaden the possibility of viewers identifying with it, offering more national than regional connotations.

Indeed, the tale of *La Señora* deliberately does not reveal the name of the place of action. However, viewers are given some clues to enable them to recognise a real location: the background scenery suggests that it takes place somewhere in the north of Spain

in an area which is damp, has leafy vegetation, is close to the sea and rich in coalmines. To the majority of viewers, these clues would bring to mind the countryside of Asturias; equally, it could be the Basque Country or the Galician region. The tale avoids any kind of political secessionist connotation linked to these places, ultimately giving no name to the scenery: the stereotyped and much exported Andalusian space or the troubled or the ideologised regions of Catalonia are avoided. The representation of this setting brings regionalist connotations, but does not detract from its feeling of symbolic inclusivity. It refers to a region as a part of Spain; not to a region with an autonomous and distinct culture or history.

This location brings with it *costumbrista* and ethnographic touches which are used to emphasise, through these particularities, the essence of what is Spanish (wooded countryside, the coast and the sea, natural resources, Hispanic fauna, rugged mountains, rural scenery, autochthonous food and drink, family meals, meetings in the canteen).

The natural, open spaces have a very important presence in the tale, as much from a narrative perspective as an aesthetic and figurative dimension. It is in these settings that particularly significant moments unfold. Meetings, reunions, resolutions and several turning points take place with cliffs or leafy forests in the background. As a consequence these natural environments, where the majority of the romantic plot develops, symbolise their natural character and spontaneity in contrast with the artificiality of social constructions and barriers. The metaphorical meaning of open spaces becomes clear when used in contrast with the enclosed spaces: mainly a variety of homes that provide settings, characters, stories and narrative resources with which to weave the tale.

In contrast, the urban space of Madrid is the setting for *Amar en tiempos revueltos*. The idea of Madrid is represented via the image of a neighbourhood; a large yet not exclusive unit of scenery. The oft-mentioned square, Plaza de los Frutos, becomes the reference point, using metonymy through which the 'part' (the Plaza) represents the 'whole' (the neighborhood and even the city). Everyday life around the square often becomes a metaphor for life in Madrid: a city which reflects republican everyday life and therefore can be extrapolated to any other urban setting.

The role played by the city of Madrid during the Civil War, being a place of republican resistance and therefore especially affected by the conflict, makes it a useful narrative resource to articulate plotlines of conflict, heroics and personal and romantic victories. In this way, the plot draws the audience into the most day-to-day consequences of the Civil War, focusing especially on the ups and downs of working-class characters. Scenes such as the factory (the workplace of the working class) and the bar (a working class place of leisure) are presented as points of particular reference which confer a certain sense of realism to the stories. Thus viewers gain an image of history, experiences and the difficulties of a nation.

Spatial references as a means of incorporating 'Spanishness' into the story are reinforced by the characters' language and linguistic uses. The entire group speaks exclusively Castillian, avoiding the heterogeneity of languages and forms of speech typical of Spanish reality (Catalan, Basque and Galician). The dominant language Castillian, which is normalised and standardised, free of localisms, regionalisms and personal uses, exemplifies the most orthodox version of the official Spanish language in the whole country. As a shared linguistic code, it conveys the value of unity and common



ground in opposition to the exclusivity associated with regional languages. The stories portray Castillian as the language of Spain as one nation. Regional languages are avoided, thus hiding those identities which assert their cultural and nationalist differences from the 'Spanish' one. It should not be forgotten that the main nationalist movements in Spain legitimate their claims on the basis of their cultural and, in particular, their linguistic idiosyncrasy. The Catalan, Basque and Galician languages are presented as dimensions of Catalan, Basque and Galician national identities. Indeed, the controversy around the use of Castillian and its relationship with the other autochthonous languages in Spain is an important trigger point in social and political debates around the country. Only some of the secondary characters who are lower class (such as Adelina in *La Señora* and Jacinto in *Amar en tiempos revueltos*) show regional uses of Castillian language for their own *costumbrista* characterisation. None of them uses any language other than Castillian.

### History and collective social concerns as features of a nation

Both series portray a society characterised by rigid axes of differentiation such as class, ideology and gender. The climate of social, economic and ideological polarisation helps explain some of the dramatic conflicts and, at the same time, allows the articulation of a coherent and continuous explanation of the periods before and after the Spanish Civil War.

The tales compare archaic characters and situations to modernising and avant-garde figures on both the social and economic levels, such as the strictly ideological, sketching historical evolution in terms of a struggle of opposites. It follows the telenovela's traditional dialectic structure by showing the opposition between good and evil, rich and poor, men and women and progress versus traditionalism. Thus the discourse expresses some of its most significant theses. Spanish society appears to be heading toward a process of economic, social and political development which appears to be natural and predictable, but within which conservative groups can be found (such as the nobility, the army, the church) which are interested in maintaining a pre-industrial status quo. In the meantime, the sketch of the postwar – the 1940s in particular – shows a society that is stagnant or even regressive in economic, social, political and cultural terms: a situation presented as a direct consequence of the military conflict of 1936.

In reinforcing the value of a people, Spain is presented as the subject of a shared past, marked by converging difficulties which have now been overcome. This portrayal, contemplated from the time of the statement or the present time, could give the viewer a satisfactory appreciation of their current reality. In this way, the comparison between the past (recreated by the tales) and the present (or the audience's daily lives) can generate a feeling of satisfaction in viewers. The story can be interpreted as the triumph of modernity and progress, as the beginnings of contemporary Spain, overcoming the inefficiencies of the past.

At the same time, this scene of contradictions provides an ideal space in which to shed light on some of the concerns that define Spanish society in the present day (economic difficulties, human and political rights, gender equality, migration, old age). Incorporating the dominant themes in news, factual and non-fiction programmes and

the most common concerns expressed by the Spanish population in surveys, these works of historical fiction use their codes and syntax to present several issues upon which the audience can reflect.

In this way, these two telenovelas connect with many other formats which show, the social interests of their viewers. For example, this is the case of the so-called 'Telenovelas de ruptura' (which break from the previously established norms) such as *Cosita Rica* (*Gorgeous Thing*, Venevisión, 2003–2004) and *Libres como el viento* (*Free as the Wind*, RCTV, 2009–). In these programmes, besides the strictly personal subject matter, the social and cultural concerns of the production's social environment are referenced (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003). In the same way, and looking towards the European framework, fictional products of other genres aim to reflect the surrounding social setting. Well-known British productions such as *Eastenders* (BBC, 1985–) and *Brookside* (Channel 4, 1982–2003) concentrate their attention on the working class, focusing very clearly on everyday subjects such as the institution of the family, its union and harmonious coexistence. They maintain the realistic tone of productions which have become classics such as the first British soap opera, *The Grove Family* (BBC, 1954–1957), in which humour, crime and realism are brought together, and the long-running *Coronation Street* (ITV, 1960–) which dramatises personal relationships within the framework of the community. They give voice to both evocative and humorous tales, portraying a lifestyle that is now extinct. However, above all, they are very inclined to gather and draw broad social concerns, such as homosexuality, multiculturalism and immigration (Gerarghty, 1995; Holmes, 2006).

In both telenovelas, special visibility is given to themes which are linked to gender equality and with the ascent of women to positions of power. Thus, we can observe the strength associated with the leading female characters because of their solid personalities and powerful labour roles. Sometimes the tale slips into anachronism, representing female stereotypes to a modern audience which were settled in the past. Questions such as gender violence, women's rights and the balance between personal and work life are represented in both tales. In a clear connection with gender issues, the discourse of these telenovelas emphasises other questions which articulate the daily debates of viewers. The redefinition of feminine and masculine roles, such as the model of a classic nuclear family, is an example of social dynamics reflected in the story. Birth and childrearing outside of marriage, divorce, adultery, cohabitation, adoption, homosexuality, premarital sex and so on are represented and judged according to the socially correct principles prevalent in Spain nowadays.

Thus, fiction establishes clear continuities with subjects of general interest highlighted by the informative media and, in particular, television news bulletins. Current political and legal debates are echoed. For example, the two major national parties (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party and the Popular Party) are defenders of the unity of Spain, yet they have responded in different ways. Controversial socialist measures such as the *Ley de Recuperación de Memoria Histórica de 2007* (Law on Recovery of Historical Memory of 2007), which established measures in favour of people who suffered persecution during the Civil War or the Francoist dictatorship, or the *Ley de Matrimonios Homosexuales de 2005* (Law on Homosexual Marriage of 2005), which regulates the legal union of two people of the same sex, are justified in fiction (Galán,

2007). Both telenovelas depict unpleasant situations from the past which explain the legal corrections in the present. Meanwhile, other burning political debates which generate deeper fractures in Spanish public opinion are avoided: for example, the case of the Catalan and Basque nationalists' claims, which threaten the existing model of nation. Their demands for independence as different nations from Spain, represented in several nationalist political parties, are not mentioned in a fictional discourse which aims to contribute to the maintenance of the status quo.

Finally, as in the British case, the subject of the working world has a strong presence in both series. The tale alludes to the secondary sector through the figure of the industrial manual worker in *Amar en tiempos revueltos*, or the miner in *La Señora*. The service sector is also mentioned through the wage earner in the tertiary sector or employee: the shop assistant in *Amar en tiempos revueltos* and the teacher in *La Señora*. In all cases tales promote the workers' right to decent and more humane working conditions.

Conversely, merit, effort and educational achievement are presented as the irrefutable means of social mobility, in accordance with the meritocratic ideology dominant in consolidated capitalist systems. Thus, characters reach social success by demonstrating these types of resource. Ana Rivas (*Amar en tiempos revueltos*) becomes a great manager of an important enterprise after demonstrating her abilities while working as a shop assistant. Manolita (*Amar en tiempos revueltos*) gets an important position in a department store after showing her skill in sales. Victoria (*La Señora*) manages a working mine after demonstrating her knowledge and ability in a period in which women are largely excluded from public and economic life.

Old age, illness, dismissal and unemployment are other current problems which are referred to by several characters in the stories. For example, Enriqueta (*Amar en tiempos revueltos*) died after a long period of Alzheimer's disease. Juanito (*Amar en tiempos revueltos*) exemplifies the difficulties of finding a job after a long period away from Spain. Amalia (*La Señora*) tells the audience of the suffering linked to poverty and old age. All these characters receive support from the groups to which they belong; in some cases, they even get to resolve these conflicts, thanks to the help of the community. These stories serve to create recommended courses of action based, above all, on solidarity, mutual aid and cooperation by members of the community.

## Conclusion

The telenovela can play a socialising and educational role. On the micro-level, it offers a key to a reading of our immediate reality. It serves as a translation of our own experiences and proposes models of action to us (Cassetti and Villa, 1992). Spectators may identify on the small screen a situation that is familiar to them and which they may have confronted. At the same time, audiences can perceive an appropriate way to resolve a conflict in the most functional manner (Cassata and Skill, 1983). On the macro-level, television has the capacity to broadcast, interpret and evaluate notions and representations of reality.

As well as being a transmitter of culture, television fiction can serve to homogenise world views and foster the perception in the viewer of belonging to a community. Shared events and difficulties in the past, and memories of these situations, can be reflected on

the small screen. Thus, the present and modern society can be explained as a result of this recent history recreated by television fiction.

The Spanish public generalist television channels, in both the regional framework (TV3, TVG, ETB) and the national (TVE), have become a useful medium for the transmission of discourses that show different viewpoints relating to Spain as a country. The regional channels have used television fiction to foster their own identities and cultural, linguistic or historical differences from other areas of the country. The main national channel (TVE) uses historical television fiction about Spain to highlight similarities, links and common points between all the regions in the country. These tales foster the idea of a unique Spain, composed of different regions linked by a common historical development. For this reason, the television formulae are determined by the type of idea of Spain that they wish to cultivate.

It is possible to argue that the series analysed here are merely one part of Televisión Española's policy in reinforcing the idea of Spain as a whole. On the level of fiction, long-running series such as *Cuéntame (Tell Me, TVE 1, 2001–)* play equally to a re-reading of history from a micro and familiar perspective as well as the national. Similarly, other markedly informative formats have defended the idea of the homeland through various procedures. *Españoles por el mundo (Spaniards around the World, TVE 1, 2009–)* shows the vicissitudes of those who are resident outside of the country and who adapt, not without certain difficulties, to new cultural settings while maintaining their Spanish identity. *España Directo (Live from Spain, TVE 1, 2005–)* uses the direct reportage genre to highlight newsworthy events from around the country, narrating the present in an everyday and hyperrealist way and concentrating its content on Spanish cultural subjects and events. *Palabra por Palabra (Word for Word, La 2, 2005–)* explores the complexity of Spanish linguistics, investigating the origins and the transformations of the different languages in Spain and placing special emphasis on the Castilian language. In all certainty, other formats can be studied in the future as elements of televisual policy designed to defend the main aspects of Spanish culture.

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## Notes

1. TV3 or the most important public regional channel in Catalonia; ETB or the most important regional channel in the Basque Country; TVG or the most important public regional channel in Galicia. Almost every region or autonomous community (the administrative regional unit in Spain) has one or several of its own channels that broadcast in its own territory.
2. The acronym TVE (Televisión Española) meaning 'Spanish television' will be used to refer to the two public national television channels which make up the Radio Televisión Española (RTVE) corporation. TVE 1 refers to the first and most popular of the Televisión Española

- channels commonly known as 'One' ('La Uno'). TVE 2 refers to the second of Televisión Española's channels, known as 'Two' ('La Dos'). They broadcast across the whole country.
3. *Costumbrismo* refers to the literary or pictorial interpretation of local everyday life, mannerisms and customs.
  4. Figures refer to the last episode in the first season, broadcast on TVE 1 on 29 May 2008.
  5. It is worth mentioning the example of references such as those provided in the character of Regina Caballero (Season 3). As the wife of a high-level Francoist official and an inflexible, extremely religious and deeply Francoist woman, this character exemplifies femininity in its most orthodox and conservative dimension, and therefore connects with other gender representations, coinciding to a certain extent with those found in the text of *La Señora*. Such is the case of the character of Isabelita, in the first series, a traditional young woman married to a military man with authoritarian attitudes. In the same way, in some of her appearances Regina alludes to the 1920s as an era of dissolute behaviour and licentious customs, thus exemplifying the supposed reading of the most resistant groups to change in relation to this period.
  6. *Españolista* as an ideology defends Spain as a unitary nation and state, in contrast with secessionist regionalist movements.

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