

Television fiction on TV3 and Catalan cultural identity: case study of the situation comedy *Plats bruts*

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Abstract

Most research on television has focused on compartmented descriptions of the medium. So we learn about production routines, the channels' business structures, programming design, the results of qualitative and quantitative discourse analyses, and even find a few studies on television consumption. This division of studies into subjects, possibly due to the complexity of the television environment, means that we have few visions of the medium as a whole. In other words, it is hard to find results in the same study that take into account the diverse processes in which television is involved. Conversely, while scientific-academic production has described the engineering and recorded the techniques and processes of the media's different structures, little intelligible light has been shed on reception related to the production field and to culture. This is the starting point of the doctoral thesis produced by the author of this article, which presents some of its results.

Key words

Cultural identity, fiction TV series, TV3, reception

Resum

La majoria de les recerques que s'han dut a terme sobre l'àmbit televisiu s'han dedicat a fer descripcions parcel·lades del mitjà. D'aquesta manera coneixem les rutines productives, l'estructura empresarial de les cadenes, el disseny de la programació, els resultats d'anàlisis qualitatives i quantitatives dels discursos i, en menor grau, trobem estudis sobre el consum televisiu. Aquesta divisió temàtica dels estudis, possiblement deguda a la complexitat de l'entorn televisiu, fa que comptem amb poques visions de conjunt sobre aquest mitjà. És a dir, és difícil obtenir, d'un mateix estudi, resultats que tinguin en compte els diversos processos en els quals intervé la televisió. D'altra banda, la producció científicoacadèmica s'ha encarregat de descriure l'enginyeria i registrar les tècniques i els processos de les diverses estructures dels mitjans, però les pistes cap a un coneixement de la recepció relacionada amb el camp de la producció i amb la cultura encara són poc intel·ligibles. Tot això constitueix el punt de partida de la tesi doctoral que ha dut a terme l'autora d'aquest article, que ens presenta una part dels seus resultats.

Paraules clau

Identitat cultural, sèries de ficció, TV3, recepció

Objectives and methodology

Our research is a work of introspection on the television industry which starts by observing a macro-genre. The key areas of our analysis are the creation process, the audiovisual text and the reception of fiction. We set out to study the fiction produced by TV3, a channel belonging to the public broadcaster Televisió de Catalunya (TVC), and we focus on one series, a situation comedy. We chose the autonomous Catalan channel due to proximity with the context. The subject of the study is the situation comedy *Plats bruts* (Dirty Dishes), broadcast by TV3. We analyse the episodes "Tinc nació" (I have a nation) and "Tinc espelma" (I have a candle). We chose a situation comedy because production of this format is relatively recent in Spain and Catalonia compared with the American and British markets, so its audience is also new. In this regard, there is also something of a vacuum in analysis of the genre. Our interests lie in finding out how fiction is constructed as

narration, if there are cultural identity referents, and what are the use, appropriation and consumption by the subjects of the identity-based representations appearing in the audiovisual products.

The logistics of our enquiry are expressed in the methodological framework that brings together the different lines of our analysis. The first describes how a fiction series is produced, from information acquired during in-depth interviews held with its directors and scriptwriters. The second focuses on studying the series' content, its characters, the description of its context, the topics and the narrative structure of the genre. We use textual analysis to study the series and to examine each of the parts that go to make up a situation comedy. In this phase we identify the different representations, in context and space, that allude to cultural issues. We discover the devices of the genre, the narration and its characters.

The third line consists of a qualitative analysis of the series' reception, which helps us to understand how the audience

relates to televised fiction. Discussion groups are a tool towards conducting an ethnographic analysis and explore the appropriation and reconfiguration of significations that occur in the consumption of a fiction series. We use this technique to explore the type of significations or representations which identify the subjects as familiar, and which of these let them create an idea of the collective or social reality or common space. This is one way of replying to the question: “¿Cómo me siento?” (How do I feel?), which James Lull (1997) suggests should be investigated when debating cultural identity.

The relevance of applying the methodological tools used in the research is justified by the basic idea of communication: sender, message and receiver. In other words, the scriptwriters of the episodes in question and the series coordinators were interviewed. The context of the series' production and the medium on which it was transmitted were described. We could say that the process of transmitting the message was explored, in this case two episodes from a series. Discussion groups were also organised to study reception, learning how the message, the series and the specific episode were decoded. From here on we consider the need to close the circle by analysing the message, the discourse constructed by the episodes. This architectural methodology is in fact just an analytical follow-up of the life cycle of a cultural product which will allow us to explain a communicative process in great detail. Our analysis bases its methodological structure on the “circuit of culture” proposed by Stuart Hall (1997), involving several processes including representation, regulation, consumption, production and identity. In general, we try to understand what happens with the content of a piece of televised fiction in a specific genre. This is a way of explaining how the media create meaningful proposals that form part of our daily lives, and how these are reorganised, diluted and reinforced by being consumed. Consequently, the subjects are active agents in the continuous and permanent construction of representations and references that allude to spaces in our everyday lives, particularly that of identity.

The study of televised fiction as a producer of identity-based referents in a cultural context is justified by the need to work with the category of “culture” linked to the mass media, particularly television. Furthermore, the study of television genres is essential because it offers a level of analysis that includes the cultural and discursive aspects of communication (Larsen 1993).

The analysis of the production of television fiction, of audiovisual texts and their consumption is important for several reasons. Firstly, it creates knowledge about interrelationships between the elements of this triad (television, identity, culture), and secondly, it records cultural representations, their realisation and their operationalisation. It is also important because it lets us investigate the characteristics of the referential elements of cultural identity within a global context. The final objective of this line of research is to serve as a precedent for the design of cultural production policies for television channels consistent with the social context and to revive the social bond as the public service function of television.

Theoretical notes

All communication involves an input of identity-based representation, in the words of Dominique Wolton: “There is no communication without identity” (Wolton 1995: 277). These words explain the reconfiguration of the place occupied by the media within the social structure, since they are no longer mere suppliers of information and are seen as mediators, and not only between the real and represented worlds. In sociological terms, in both cases the media, both as suppliers and mediators, exercise the role of social agents.

In its various modes of expression, public or private, television maintains different relationships with society and other social agents. “The strength of television is precisely that it is simultaneously a transnational factor of communication and an agent of national sovereignty. Its originality lies in being two things: an element of social bonding in the heart of a national community, and an element of communication between different national identities” (Wolton 1995: 290). To conclude, we would say that according to James Lull (1990), television ritual acts on three levels: on culture, on the family environment and on the subjects.

Cultural studies are the theoretical pillar of our investigation because they bring together two categories that had become separated: products and culture. One of the main interests of this line of research is the social contextualisation of the studies. Stuart Hall (1997), a precursor of this approach, applies it to the media and defines them as producers of signifieds. He analyses the circulation and consumption of media products and asks how audiences use and/or decode their content to produce other signifieds. For Hall, representation through language is a central element in the process of producing signifieds.

David Morley (1998) cites Evans to explain that the analysis of the media in cultural studies has taken two directions: one expresses the idea of an active audience and the other argues that the media content is polysemic and open to interpretation. Hall describes it differently in his article “Encoding-Decoding” (Hall 1987), in which he confers the same freedom of action on the text and the reader; the latter can choose from preferential content, and the media content tries to supply these preferences.

Every media text defines its signifieds by their context, through a collective process of constructing meaning. Therefore the meaning of the text arises from the confrontation between the text and its addressee (Hall 1987). So Hall involves the production, circulation, distribution and consumption of cultural products in the construction of social imaginaries. In this case, “the power of television viewers to reinterpret signifieds is hardly comparable with the discursive power of the centralised media institutions when constructing texts that the television viewer then interprets, and to think otherwise is nonsense” (Morley 1998: 434). It is this relativisation of the sovereignty of the television viewer faced with media content, explained by Morley, to which this research adheres.

Results

The explanation of the results follows the same order as our methodological design. First we describe the data obtained in the in-depth interviews, then we set out what we observed in the textual analysis, and finally we note the findings obtained in the discussion groups.

In-depth interviews

From the creative team of *Plats bruts* we interviewed Jordi Sánchez, who has played several roles in the series: coordinator, scriptwriter and actor. He also plays the lead in the series, alongside actor and series fellow-coordinator, Joel Joan. Two of the series' scriptwriters took part in the exercise: Mercè Sàrrias, responsible for the episode "Tinc nació", and Sergi Pompermayer, responsible for "Tinc espelma".

The interviews were conducted separately and were only recorded on audio, later being transcribed for analysis. The discourse produced by the interviewees gave us a general idea of the creative and production work of situation comedy produced in a Catalan context.

Situation comedy as a television format resembles the theatrical experience of the *Plats bruts* creative team because, as a genre, it uses theatre-type dynamics: there is even one scene where the characters are presented acting before an audience.

The production style of American situation comedies was used as a model when planning the series design, for example *Cheers*, *Friends*, *Mad about You*, *Seinfeld*, etc. The basic elements of the format of these series were reproduced, including the settings, the relationships between the characters, the dynamics established on the set with the public present, and the narrative structure of the sequences.

The characterisation of the characters is based on the traits that the series creatives recognise as close to their personal contexts, mainly during the time when the coordinators studied at the Institut del Teatre (Theatre Institute) in Barcelona. The interviewees recognised that irresponsibility and infantile attitudes were essential characteristics of the characters which they felt intensified throughout the seasons.

As regards the stories developed in the episodes, one of the aims of the creative team was to deal with taboo or sensitive topics in both Catalan and Spanish contexts. Some of these topics caused a degree of tension in some social contexts, for instance in religious and monarchist circles. This situation comedy was considered a pioneer in creating humour about the royal family.

The scripts of *Plats bruts* are the result of group work: every scriptwriter was responsible for developing one episode, and the writers' version was then revised and corrected by the series coordinators.

For the interviewees the humour, the basic ingredient of the situation comedy genre, was universal. However they felt that there were different types of humour and that their characteristics depend on geographical and cultural locations; some of the types of humour touched on were Spanish, Andalusian,

Catalan, English, urban and non-urban. But they also considered that the series' humour was based more on developing situations than on gags. In their discourse, they explained that making fun of others is the basis of Spanish humour, while in Catalan humour you try to laugh at yourself. They therefore mark differences with some styles of humour but build bridges with others, like English humour. They even made the point that the humour of American cinematographer Woody Allen was close to themselves and their context.

According to the interviewees, the language of the series was colloquial and used swear words, which they said was authentic street language.

Finally, they were questioned on the two specific episodes and made comments about "Tinc nació". About this episode they explained that they were trying to create humour about a nationalist issue while at the same time making it clear that they were not in favour of Spanish nationalism. The story narrated in this episode is based on stereotypes about what is considered Catalan. As regards "Tinc espelma", the interviewees could not remember the plot and so they did not refer to it at all.

Textual analysis

The relationship of the characters with the story is a way of bringing together "the whole" in the audiovisual text, that is, with an inner description of the series, and leads on to a description of the fictional text's connections with the external, non-fiction environment. To achieve this, the explicit and implicit evaluations verbalised by the characters in their dialogues were identified. We also recorded the verbal and visual references present in the episodes analysed.

We should indicate that the weight of the verbal text in the two episodes is absolute, and is characterised by the use of what we call "incorrect" or colloquial Catalan. In "Tinc nació", the characters expressed themselves in colloquial Spanish due to requirements of the script. Finally, the treatment of the discourse lay somewhere between irony, drama and complicity.

Identification of the evaluations and references used by the characters in the situation comedy is a basic issue in this research.

According to our observations, the evaluations expressed allow anchorage points to be established between two different spheres: one point created by the fiction and the other attached to a social sphere, to situations, characters or institutions that exist in the non-fiction world. In other words, in the construction of the episode's plot there is specific content created by the scriptwriters and established in the field of fiction. Over this "scaffolding" of fiction, another parallel discourse is built that makes evaluations of and references to the non-fiction world. With the identification of the evaluations made by the characters, one of the goals of this research is achieved: to locate the discourse of televised fiction within the social terrain.

The verbal, visual and sound references identified in the textual analysis of the episodes refer to spaces, characters, social

practices and audiovisual productions linked to different contexts.

In both episodes, the fields to which the references identified were linked were positioned according to proximity or distance. In other words, there are references linked to the local context, in this case Catalan, like the patriotic figures “banner of Santa Eulàlia” and “drummer of Bruc”. But visual references were also recorded to tourist spots in Madrid, like the “Puerta de Alcalá” and “Torres Kio”, both references linked to a context that we could call Spanish.

The episodes studied made use of references linked to contexts other than Catalan or Spanish, an environment that we call global. Examples of these are the names of internationally known characters like “the Queen of England”, “Versace” and “Robespierre”.

The story told in the episodes of a situation comedy constructs a context which is determined by the language in which the series’ characters express themselves. The use of Catalan is an obvious trait of belonging in our subject of study. In spite of this, there are other determinant variables like the referential elements present in the episode, which establish a division between what is “ours” and what is “other”. In the audiovisual text, criteria are established for recognising the proximity or distance of the referents and the value judgements expressed. These criteria are not formally defined, but are deduced from an analysis of the text. The devices that permit this construction of meaning are the evaluations and references recorded in the two episodes. That is, these devices form part of a fictional discourse but maintain links and relationships with other areas belonging to non-fiction and establish criteria of proximity or distance. These ideas voiced about what was observed during an analysis of the audiovisual text may be reinforced or refuted by the results of the other techniques applied, but they are useful for enriching the discussion offered by this research.

Discussion groups

Four discussion groups were set up, organised into two blocks, with two groups in each block. The subjects who took part in group meetings were chosen with a view to the socio-demographic profile of the situation comedy’s audience. One of the two blocks consisted of subjects born in Catalonia, and the other of subjects born abroad, specifically Latin Americans, because we were interested in a social group who were not far removed culturally from the Spanish context. In any case, Latin Americans are the largest immigrant group in Catalonia and also in the rest of Spain. According to Bulletin no. 11 of the Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración (Permanent Observatory for Immigration) in January 2007, the Latin American community forms the second largest immigrant group in Spain after citizens of the European Community.

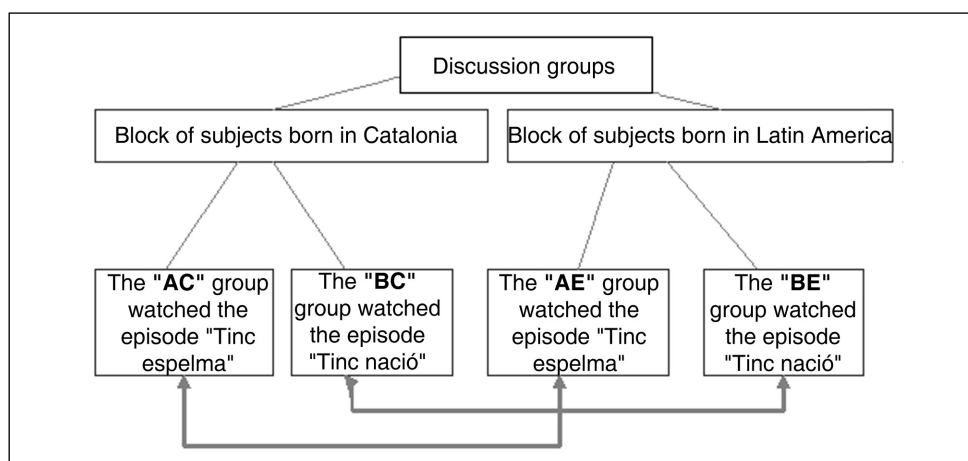
Each discussion group consisted of eight people. The groups’ activity started with a survey, then one of the episodes of the series was viewed (“Tinc espelma” or “Tinc nació”). A diagram how the discussion groups were organised is given below to clarify how this qualitative tool was applied:

The objective of this research was to constitute an initial approach to the object of the study, televised fiction as a producer of cultural referents. We were interested in understanding how referential elements were presented in both groups, so the sample is not representative. General characteristics of the sample: men and women (equal numbers), aged between 20 and 45, middle-class, viewers of TVC and who had seen the series (for the foreign-born group this requirement was not important).

Catalan block

In the discussion, the subjects in groups “AC” and “BC” recognised what they had observed in the fiction in their everyday context. The frontiers between the fictional discourse and their

Graph 1. Discussion groups organisation



Font: elaboració pròpia.

own everyday lives were blurred throughout the discussion. For both groups, the humour of the series was undoubtedly an identity trait in which they recognised themselves. In other words, asked to explain “what is Catalan” from the consumption of a situation comedy, the subjects saw the humour of the series as something close and familiar.

They credited this humour with some of the traits present in their own character: ironic and intelligent. They considered that the humour was based on situations and stereotypes that referred to the idea of what ‘Catalan’ is. For them, the use of stereotypes in everyday discourse was a quality of the Catalans.

One of the characteristics of the humour in the series that the subjects considered to be Catalan, and let them establish an analogy with other humour, was the ability of Catalans to laugh at themselves. This capacity, highlighted by the subjects, they also found expressed in British humour. In this regard, when members of this block tried to describe the finer points of the humour of the situation comedy, they constructed ties of proximity and recognition of the significations present in the narration. Conversely, this process of constituting “what we are” let them create empathies with other manifestations of complicity that went beyond their everyday borders, towards a British setting. The process of inclusion present in the previous point implies another process of rejection and lack of knowledge. In this case, the subjects rejected the humour of Spanish series because they considered that it lacked quality and based complicity on ridicule and the constant use of insults.

This block suggested that the language used in the series corresponded to a local area – Barcelona – where other dialects are not found.

For these groups, Televisió de Catalunya was a framework that conditioned the significations of its cultural products. The fact that *Plats bruts* was a TV3 series gave it an extra signification that suggested the defence of certain values.

Foreign-born block

This block argued that the idea of “what is Catalan” was expressed in the verbal and gestural language of the series. They said that while they did not identify with the characters in the series, they did identify with some of situations in the narration and that were set in the context of everyday life.

However they did recognise that there were topics, observed in the narration of the episode, that were only of interest to Catalan social circles and for subjects who lived with this context. The characters involved in the story of this episode were identified as close to a Catalan imaginary.

They suggested that implicit in both episodes was the idea of “the defence of something” which they considered belonged to “what is Catalan”. One group identified this as ‘independence’ and the other as nationalism. Both agreed with the defence of a nation.

For the subjects in both these groups, both the gestural and

verbal languages of the characters were traits that referred to Catalan imaginary.

The situation comedy format was recognised as familiar by the subjects in both groups, and they listed some characteristics: exportable format, humour-based, few exterior shots and a mass target.

This block did not consider that humour was a trait belonging to *what is Catalan*, but stated that the series’ comic register belonged to a formula that formed part of the styling of the situation comedy format.

For both groups, the humour of the series *Plats bruts* resembled American humour and was very close to the series *Friends*. Finally, these groups considered TV3 to be a production context that determined the consumption of the significations of their products.

Conclusions

The conclusions of our research attempt to generate empirical knowledge about the television sector from the study of a case in which the three primary elements of any communicative act are analysed: the sender (creation process), the message and the reception. We carried out a work of introspection on a medium and designed an *ad hoc* theoretical and methodological framework to explore the relationships established within the sector. It is evident that, in this research, we excluded the relationship of television and/or the macro-genre of fiction with other cultural industries and how they collaborate in the construction of social imaginaries (we will certainly use this material in future research).

It is undeniable that the content of cultural products is conditioned by diverse forces of power and that these do not only correspond to the productive circuit itself but to audience use and consumption. In this regard, cultural products do not escape the dynamics of global and local flows.

The analysis of the results obtained after applying the techniques of our methodological design demonstrates that the situation comedy *Plats bruts* contains representations close to the Catalan environment. The main elements that make this argumentation possible are its humour, the characterisation of the characters, their verbal and gestural behaviour, the topics dealt with and the context constructed in the episodes studied. These devices contain the symbolic charge that creates identity-based practices and at the same time establish elements of differentiation. The dynamics referred to are present in the three phases that were taken into account in our methodology. That is, in the in-depth interviews with the series scriptwriters and coordinator, in the textual analysis and in the qualitative analysis of the consumption. In this regard, the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion isolated within the conceptual framework were confirmed in this research as mechanisms for the creation of cultural identity.

In the analysis of the consumption, the Catalan subjects

noted the presence in the series of stereotypes that form part of the idea of being and existing within a Catalan imaginary and, although they may reject its use, they recognise it. This same idea is reinforced by the scriptwriters, who state that they use stereotypes to construct the stories told in the series and to generate identification. In this way, the representations on cultural identity present in the fiction studied are evaluated by the creators of the audiovisual product and by the consumers as stereotyped significations of a way of mentioning what is Catalan.

For foreign-born and Catalan subjects the topics of the episodes generated a context tied to interests that are valid in the Catalan landscape. Specifically, the groups mentioned three topics: the monarchy as raw material for everyday humour, Catalan 'independentism' and nationalism. These topics were close to their idea of "what is Catalan" and, in the case of the Catalan block, are reflected in their everyday life. In the in-depth interviews the scriptwriters, concerning this topic, they admit that they dealt with taboo issues like royalty during the series. Both in the discussion groups and in the interviews, the example was used of the late-night Andreu Buenafuente show to prove that Catalonia has been creating humour based on the Spanish monarchy for some time now, and they identified this as a characteristic trait of what they called "Catalan humour". These ideas are reinforced by the results of the textual analysis of the two episodes, in which we observe that the issue of the Spanish monarchy features in some gags where the humour is constructed with references to actions and/or declarations made by members of the royal family.

The humour of the series *Plats bruts* is another identification device, in this case only for the Catalan block and for the series' scriptwriters. The foreign-born block considered that the humour was typical of an archetypal television format nearer to the American context. They argued that the key to this format, which they recognised in the episodes viewed, was its easy humour.

Humour, as we have described it, is an element that causes divergences in our analysis. In the discussion groups, the Catalans said that the comic register of the series was a quality that they valued as their own and Catalan, while the foreign-born group defined it as part of the format. In this regard, the origin of the subjects was determinant in constructing the finer points of their evaluations. The Latin Americans probably had enough exposure to situation comedy of American origin to make them attribute an American identity to the humour. Their level of acceptance of the humour as a differentiated Catalan cultural trait was limited due to having only recently joined Catalan society. On the other hand, for Catalan communicative circles, situation comedy was a relatively recent phenomenon linked with an alien identity, so the recognition of their own forms of humour predominated.

The inclusion in the research of a group outside the Catalan setting is justified by the dynamics of an identity process. To construct the idea of "what is Catalan", a dynamic of difference

had to be established, so in this analysis the ideas expressed by the foreign-born subjects were useful to enrich and revitalise the identity discourse.

The everyday context constructed by the text of the fiction was the meeting point and place of convergence of identity for both Catalans and foreigners. That is, the cultural identity process was the margin of action that allowed the two groups to coincide. Cultural identity based on everyday life produced by fiction forms a space for conversation and negotiation of differences.

The cultural landscape in Catalonia creates a need for public television to act as an organ of cultural mediation that articulates communicative practices and dynamics in content production in constant syncretism with the notion of being an instrument for other cultures. In conclusion, public television must fulfil its mission of public service within the reach of the individuals who go to make up its society without distinction of nationality, religion or gender.

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