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Charo Lacalle
Barcelona (Spain)

Genre and Age in the Reception of Television Fiction

Género y edad en la recepción de la ficción televisiva

Abstract

This article summarizes the main results of an investigation that is part of a project regarding the construction of youth and gender identity in television fiction. The methodology integrates reception analysis (focus group) with data obtained through an anonymous questionnaire, designed to contextualize the results of the qualitative research. Television fiction is the favourite macro-genre of young people, especially women. Broadly speaking, participants appreciate the greater proximity of Spanish fiction, which favours the different mechanisms of identification/projection activated during the reception process, and they acknowledge that TV fiction has a certain didactic nature. The research highlights the more intimate nature of female reception compared to the detachment of the male viewer, who watches fiction less frequently and assimilates it as pure entertainment. Age influences the different modes of reception, while the social class and origin of participants hardly have any impact. Confident, rebellious and ambivalent characters are found to be more interesting than the rest. By contrast, the structure of the story and a major part of the topics addressed by the programme are usually consigned to oblivion, highlighting the importance of selective memory in the interpretative process, as well as suggesting the limited nature of the effects of television fiction.

Resumen

El artículo resume los principales resultados de una investigación integrada en un proyecto más amplio sobre la construcción de la identidad juvenil y de género en la ficción televisiva. La metodología combina el análisis de la recepción («focus group») con los datos obtenidos mediante un cuestionario anónimo, destinados a contextualizar los resultados del estudio cualitativo. La ficción televisiva es el macrogénero preferido por los jóvenes, sobre todo por las mujeres. En general, los participantes aprecian la mayor proximidad de la ficción española, propiciadora de los diferentes mecanismos de identificación/proyección activados en los procesos de recepción, y le reconocen un cierto carácter didáctico. La investigación pone de manifiesto el carácter más intimista de la recepción femenina, frente al mayor distanciamiento de un espectador masculino mucho más inconstante, que asimila la ficción con el puro entretenimiento. La edad influye principalmente en las diferentes modalidades de recepción, mientras que apenas se constata la incidencia de la clase social ni del origen de los participantes. Los personajes seguros de sí mismos, rebeldes y ambivalentes, interesan más que el resto. Por el contrario, la estructura del relato y una buena parte de los temas del programa visionado se relegan generalmente al olvido, lo que revela el peso de la memoria selectiva en los procesos de interpretación y sugiere el carácter limitado de los efectos de la ficción televisiva.

Keywords / Palabras clave

Young people, gender, television fiction, Internet, reception, interpretation, characters.

Jóvenes, género, ficción, televisión, Internet, recepción, interpretación, personajes.

Dr. Charo Lacalle-Zalduendo is Professor in the Department of Journalism in the Faculty of Communication Sciences at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain) (rosario.Lacalle@uab.es).

1. Introduction

Despite the influence of Cultural Studies on research into television fiction, following the impetus of feminist studies of series from the 1980s onwards (Brunsdon, 2000), many researchers have traditionally resisted admitting its innovative and educational potential, as noted by Meijer (2005), Henderson (2007) and Lacalle (2010b). Similarly, specialists' widespread interest in the processes of children's viewing (faithful consumers of the programmes targeted at them) coupled with the volatility characteristic of young viewers partly explain the void in studies on the values and opinions conveyed by television to adolescents and young adults (Von Feilitzen, 2008; Montero, 2006). Reception analysis carried out in the 1980s revealed the tendency of young adults to appropriate content, which led certain authors to stress this group's involvement with television drama (Rubin, 1985; Lemish, 2004), while other researchers noted that knowledge of fiction-production techniques boosted young viewers' pleasure (Buckingham, 1987). Subsequently, scholars have stressed the ambivalent relationship between young viewers and fiction, which according to Gerargthy (1991) fluctuates between projection and distancing. Greenberg et al. (1993) uphold the greater permeability of this target audience to dominant messages, compared to adults.

In recent years, the impetus that television fiction has undergone—fiction of a quality that is often better than in films—and the rise of new transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006), which stem from the extension of programmes to the Web, has dramatically increased young people's interest (especially that of young women) in this television genre (Lacalle, 2010a). The use of new technologies by adolescents and young adults encourages their increased involvement with the Internet,¹ resulting in a more personalised reception; this allows users to construct their own listings. Likewise, the websites linked to programmes are a kind of repository of technical and cultural knowledge that enables the main means of viewing media content to be oriented, while they also encourage reception and perform a socialising «web tribe» function (Della Torre & al. 2010).

Following on from those authors who advocate the cultural and social contextualisation of studies on viewing, the purpose of this paper is to determine the role of age and gender in the reception of television fiction. The «Adolescents' Media Practice Model» devised by Steel and Brown in 1995 and built around the dialectic between representations and interpretations performed by individuals situated in a social and cultural environment that determines their media reception will serve as a guide by which to organise the results of this study. This model emphasizes transformations in programme content due to constant negotiation between individual action and the broader social context, organized around different phases that, in accordance with both authors' opinions, affect the interpretation process: selection, interaction and application.

2. Material and methods

This article summarises ethnographic research into television fiction conducted in Catalonia between April and July 2011. It pairs an analysis of viewing with a socio-semiotic analysis of the young characters and the discourses on fiction in the Web 2.0. Analysis of viewing presented below includes three female-only focus groups and three mixed-gender focus groups built around the following age groups: 9 to 14 (one group), 15 to 17 (two groups), 18 to 23 (two groups) and 24 to 29 (one group). The six focus groups were made up of a total of 51 participants (38 females and 13 males) who discussed the different issues related to television fiction suggested by the moderator.

In order to obtain specific data on the viewing and interpretation processes, the interviewees filled out an anonymous questionnaire prior to the group interview, which posed questions on their viewing habits, their use of the Web 2.0 linked to fiction and their participation in events organised by the fiction programmes. They were also asked about their favourite programmes and characters. Following this, the group interview per se then began; this was structured around a socio-semiotic script that intersects the different stages of viewing and interpretation: preferences, viewing habits, the incorporation of new technologies into the viewing process, the construction of interpretative communities, interviewees' relationship with the young characters in the fictions analysed; the correspondence between fiction and reality; and determinations of different television formats and genres.

The number of participants in each focus group ranged from 8 to 13, in line with the plurality of interactions sought in a dimension that would minimise as much as possible the inhibition of the most introverted members. Thus, the different groups were made up of adolescents and young adults who already knew each other and who were used to talking about issues similar to those raised in the group interview. In this way we sought to reconstruct in as unforced a way as possible the natural context of their everyday interactions, which is the ultimate object of interpretation

(Baym, 2000: 201). Thus, most of the young interviewees were friends (in Lleida and Granollers), but they also had other ties that, without excluding friendship, shaped the groups in a different way, including classmates (in Sant Cugat, Barcelona and Tarragona) and participants at an after-school activity centre for youngsters at risk of social exclusion (in Girona).

The SPSS database, which was designed to process the responses to the anonymous questionnaire, includes 51 coded cases with 64 frequencies (one per variable). These frequencies represent the total number of applications of each value of the category to all the characters in the sample. The two independent variables used to perform the correlations with the others were gender and age group. When both independent variables were crossed with the secondary variables, 126 contingency tables were generated, that is, 63 for each of the independent variables chosen. Despite the high volume of data and the limited relevance of one part of the contingency tables, we chose not to discriminate the less clarifying results in order to be as exhaustive as possible. As mentioned above, the interpretation of the resulting 126 contingency tables enables us to contextualise the discourse analysis of the group interviews summarised below.

3. Results

Fiction is the genre preferred by the interviewees, led by television fiction (98%) and followed by films (74.5%), comedy/zapping programmes, including fictionalised sketches (68.6%) and animated series (64.7%). After fiction, females opt for comedy/zapping programmes (73.7%), news (50%), reality shows (39.5%) and celebrity and human-interest entertainment shows (23.7%), while males opt for films (84.6%) and sports programmes (61.5%). By age, the 9 to 14 and 24 to 29 age groups watch more films (75%). The group between the ages of 15 and 17 was more interested in reality shows (52.6%) and celebrity and human interest entertainment shows (31.6%). Young adults aged 18 to 23 preferred humour/zapping programmes and news shows (both at 87.5%).

Half of the interviewees watch television fiction regularly, one-third of the young adults do so very frequently and only a few do so occasionally. Women prefer Spanish fiction more than men, with men tending to prefer US programmes. By age, adolescents aged 15 to 17 are the most constant, although the 24 to 29 age group also watch their favourite programmes quite often.

3.1. Selection

Sentimental topics trigger young women's attraction for drama. Males, however, prefer comedies, even though the most important finding on men's viewing preferences is unquestionably their wide-ranging dispersion. The most popular series among the interviewees are «Física o Química» (Antena3), «Polseres vermelles» (TV3) and «El internado» (Antena3). «El internado» stands out in the 15 to 17 and 18 to 23 age groups, while the dispersion in the 24 to 29 age group is such that it renders it impossible to draw a clear map of their tastes. As a whole, we can note a clear preference for fiction programmes with a high number of young actors among the leading characters.

The interviewees rank Spanish fiction beneath its US counterpart. The unjustified endings and excessive prolongation of programmes, a lack of technical quality and special effects and surplus of fiction programmes made for the family target audience are the aspects criticised the most. While some interviewees prefer characters who are self-assured, as well as «bad guys» and rebels, others chose more ambivalent characters (good/bad). Unlike gender, age is hardly a factor in the choice of favourite character.

The most popular character is Ulises («El barco», Antena3), followed by Yoli («Física o Química», Antena3) and Luisa («Aída», Tele5). Females opt for three characters from three fiction shows broadcast by Antena3, all of whom are noteworthy for their physical attractiveness and who are tormented differently by the obstacles they must overcome in their emotional relationships, namely, Ulises («El barco»), Marcos («El internado») and Lucas («Los hombres de Paco»). In contrast to this, however, the dispersion of answers from the males remains, and even though they also include attractive young women among their favourites (Yoli, «Física o Química»), they seem to prefer caricatured adults (Amador, «La que se avecina»; Diego, «Los Serrano» and Mauricio, «Aída»). Interestingly, most of the interviewees were not able to point out the character that they like the least, and with the exception of those who prefer comedy, all the interviewees want the characters to evolve.

3.2. Interaction

Generally speaking, the content and the characters are determining factors when watching a fiction programme regularly or at least somewhat regularly, even though the choice of some of the participants in the focus group is conditioned by the reception context. The interviewees tend to watch fiction primarily alone, with a family member or with their partner, and only rarely with

friends. Women tend to watch the programmes alone, whereas men do so with their family. By age, the 9 to 14 group and young adults aged 18 to 23 watch the most fiction alone, albeit for different reasons: the first group's interest in animation, which the older family members rarely share, and the second group's interest in major international hits, which tend to be watched on the Internet even before they premiere in Spain. On the other hand, adolescents aged 15 to 17 often watch the television with other family members living in their household; therefore, this age group's preference for family-targeted programmes facilitates watching programmes together. Young adults aged 24 to 29 living on their own tend to share this form of entertainment with their partners.

The decision to watch programmes alone or with siblings stems from the diversity of tastes among parents and children. When their preferences are the same, the family watches shows on the main television set in the house together, even though they tend not to discuss the programmes. Some young interviewees even confessed to avoiding watching television as a family because they were embarrassed to watch certain programmes with their parents. Outside the home, however, fiction becomes a recurring light topic of conversation that often binds them with other people at school or work. However, even though the interviewees tend to talk about the fiction programmes they watch with others, their preference is to do so with their friends.

Women stand out for sharing their experiences about fiction with their group of friends. By age, girls from 9 to 14 use fiction as a topic of conversation with their friends. Adolescents from 15 to 17 tend to talk about the programmes they watch with their siblings, while the 18 to 23 age group talks less about television programmes, and the 24 to 29 age group talks about them almost exclusively with their partner.

3.2.1. TV and/or Internet

The difference between the number of interviewees who watch fiction on the television and on the Internet is quite small. Women watch more programmes on the Internet. By age, girls from 9 to 14 and young adults aged 24 to 29 prefer television, the former because at this age they are rarely free from their parents' control over the contents they watch, while the latter tend to enjoy their leisure time in the company of their partner after the workday. The age groups 15 to 17 and 18 to 23 are the ones that watch the most fiction on the Internet, data coherent with their inclination for new US shows and for watching by themselves.

Many of those who watch fiction on the television concentrate exclusively on this activity. However, some adolescents are in the habit of doing their homework as they watch their favourite programmes, while young adults aged 24 to 29 often combine watching TV with their household chores. The 15 to 17 and 18 to 23 age groups, however, tend to watch television while they use forums and social networks (sometimes on their smart phones), where they also talk about questions unrelated to the programme they are watching.

Watching TV programmes in streaming is the most popular choice among the interviewees who watch fiction on the Internet, either on the channels' official websites or on other sites². The desire to watch fiction without having to be bound by the programme schedule encourages some youngsters to download the programmes, which they then watch on television sets for reasons of technical quality. This quest for quality also motivates the interviewees who are indecisive about their favourite medium and combine the television and Internet depending on which is more convenient at any given time (such as watching programmes recorded on the computer in HD if they do not have the right television set)³.

Loyal fans tend use the Internet to watch the episodes they were unable to watch on the TV set, while the other interviewees tend to miss those shows or ask someone to tell them what happened. The Web is also used to get information on programmes, especially by women. By age, the most visitors to these websites are the 15 to 17 year age group, who are the leading members of the fan groups (wishing to keep abreast of all the news related to their favourite fiction shows). In contrast to this, however, this activity diminishes drastically among young adults aged 24 to 29, who have more responsibilities and less free time than the others.

Almost half the interviewees talk about the programmes somewhat frequently in forums and social networks. However, the percentage of women users of 2.0 fiction resources is much higher than the percentage of men, while barely any differences can be discerned by age. The most popular social networks linked to fiction 2.0 are Facebook, Twitter and Tuenti. The interviewees tend to use these Internet tools to look for photographs, videos or music from their favourite shows, as well as links to the websites where the original material can be found. However, they rarely contribute their opinions, nor do they tend to share contents with other users.

3.2.2. Fandom

Fourteen people, or 27.5% of the interviewees, are fans of some fiction shows and are linked to some fan group. However, no participant in the study has ever created anything such as a web-site or blog devoted to a character, story or actor. There are more female than male fans (31.6% and 15.4%, respectively), even though no significant differences are found by gender. By age, adolescents aged 15 to 17 years old are more involved in the phenomenon of fandom (42.1%), which gradually wanes over time (12.5% in the 24 to 29 year age group). «Polseres vermelles» (TV3) and «El barco» (Antena3), two series mainly targeted at young people, are the fiction shows with the most fans. Other programmes being broadcast at the time the focus groups were meeting («Física o Química» and «El internado» on Antena3, and «La que se avecina on Tele5) and even some programmes that had ended («Aquí no hay quien viva», Antena3) also have young fans on the Internet. The characters with the highest number of fans are Lleó («Polseres vermelles», TV3) and Ulises («El barco», Antena3).

3.3. Application

The sentimental and relationship-based problems of the characters attract the interest of the interviewees much more than social issues. However, some young interviewees believe that television fiction is a major source of learning and that it helps them to cope with personal problems or socialisation issues. There are also youngsters who appreciate current or historical information provided by such fiction, while the remainder do not believe that it teaches them anything and only see this fiction as a form of entertainment.

The participants in the focus groups believe that the lifestyle shown on foreign fiction programmes is very different to the lifestyles of young Spaniards, thus many value domestically produced fiction precisely because it is more familiar. Nonetheless, many of the youngsters interviewed criticised the trend towards exaggeration and think that the plots, experiences or places (homes, schools, workplaces, etc.) tend to be more lifelike than the characters themselves. The youngest viewers recognise similarities with the characters' way of speaking, dressing and acting, while the 24 to 29 age group finds it hard to identify with them.

Fiction does not tend to serve as a reference as the interviewees cope with their day-to-day problems. However, even though some of the plots are not very realistic, there are youngsters of all ages who try to extrapolate the ideas from the fiction to their own reality, a more marked trend among critical viewers. In fact, the sentimental relationships and entertainment of the main characters are the representations that the participants in the focus groups wanted to imitate the most often. Some youngsters also identified with the attitude and actions of the characters, contextualised according their own experience.

4. Conclusions and discussion

Television fiction is the macro-genre preferred by the interviewees, especially the females, whose greater loyalty to their favourite programmes is coherent with their preference for dramatic shows (mainly soap operas). Conversely, the males' inclination for comedy corresponds to the much more discontinuous nature of male viewing. On the other hand, the social class of the participants in the focus groups did not seem to influence their television viewing, nor did their origin (local or foreign). Generally speaking, the interviewees can be classified into the four groups proposed by Millwood and Gatfield (2002) according to their reception patterns and attitude towards the programmes:

- Fanatics: they are deeply enthusiastic about television fiction and follow it regularly, usually without questioning it.
- Ironic: they like television fiction, but they experience contradictory feelings, which sometimes lead them to adopt a critical attitude towards the programmes.
- Non-committed: they are attracted by television fiction but only follow it sporadically when seeking an «easy» form of entertainment.
- Dismissive: these viewers are full of prejudices against television fiction and never or almost never watch it.

Females' loyalty to their favourite fiction shows partly contradicts much of the spontaneity that Morley attributed to female viewing in 1986 and reveals the fact that the most casual planning and viewing are linked not to viewers' gender but to programme genre.

More familiar topics and typically Spanish humour are among the most highly valued aspects, as well as the characters' problems and controversial themes (Tufté, 2007). However, even though some interviewees were disdainful of Spanish fiction (compared to that of the US), others appreci-

ated its greater familiarity and recognised that it had a certain didactic value. Thus, the enthusiasm shown by adolescents and young adults for the Catalan show «Polseres vermelles», a drama featuring a group of children and adolescents hospitalised for serious illnesses, reveals the educational potential of fanfiction in adolescents' personal development, as noted by authors like Rebecca W. Black (2008).

The youngsters expressed their preference for the characters who are their age (Harwood, 1997). However, self-assured characters, as well as those who are rebels and ambivalent, aroused greater interest than the others, an indication of a possible cathartic identification aimed at reconciling the similarities between the characters and the viewer with the extraordinary nature of the narrative, as noted by Gripsrud, following Jauss (Gripsrud, 2005). Nonetheless, the ironic interviewees clearly understand that the characters are stereotypes and that their experiences do not resemble those of real youngsters (Spence, 1995), while the fanatics believe that the general features of the characters tend to be realistic (in the emotional sense of the concept as defined by Ien Ang in 1985). The desire to imitate the most admired characters⁴, as well as the similarities between the ways these characters speak and the viewers' speech patterns, also bring the latter closer to the fiction and reveal the constant process of mutual feedback induced by television viewing (Galán Fajardo & del Pino, 2010; Lacalle & al., 2011).

The interviewees' preferences reaffirm the influence of gender in television viewing (Lemish, 2004; McMillin & Fisherkeller, 2008), since the females prefer good-looking characters, while the males tend to prefer the unusual ones, or «geeks» even though the dispersion of male tastes makes it difficult to generalise. In any event, both appreciate the image of eternal adolescence projected in fiction by the young characters, who spend most of their time between recreation and sentimental and sexual relations (Bragg & Buckingham, 2004).

The interviewees of all ages, especially the females, preferred to watch fiction by themselves due to their divergent tastes with their parents. This thus revalidates the relationship between family roles and television viewing noted by and Morley (1986), Silverstone (1994) and Lull (1990), except that in single-parent families headed by mothers (more numerous in the analysis sample than single-parent families headed by men), the mother now controls the main television set. Contrary to what Bragg and Buckingham (2004) claim, youngsters who tend to watch television with their family rarely comment on the more delicate topics (mainly related to sex) with their parents. Nor did the focus groups provide any indication of possible closer inter-generational ties in families, which these British authors claims characterises television viewing shared among the different household members.

However, the socialising nature of television fiction can be seen in the interviewees' enthusiasm at talking about their favourite programmes, mainly with their peers, which dovetails with the results of the study by Thornham and Purvis (2005). This enthusiasm suggests that, as Modlesky (1979) noted, some viewers may regard television fiction as a kind of extension of their family, a «second family» that enables them to create a «fantasy community» boosted today by the rising use of forums and social networks to comment on them. The ease with which the majority of the interviewees speak about fiction also reaffirms its «therapeutic» nature and its role as a catalyst of social relations (Madill & Goldemeir, 2003), to such an extent that social use or interaction (Rubin, 1985) seems to be one of the main reasons driving youngsters to consume fiction.

Youngsters also find fiction to be a way of evading their problems and everyday duties. This function has been systematically recognised by Cultural Studies researchers ever since the pioneering analysis of the series «Crossroads» performed by Hobson in 1982, which was revalidated in more recent studies (McMillin & Fisherkeller, 2008). Hence the fanatics recognise the addictive nature of fiction, as noted by authors like Millwood and Gatfield (2002), which is only fostered by the rising hybridisation of formats characteristic of today's television production in an environment of extreme competitiveness.

The interviewees are perfectly aware of the determinations to which the different television genres and formats are subjected, something which seems to boost the viewing pleasure of ironic viewers, as Buckingham (1987) noted. However, while the fanatics prefer the plots to be surprising with unexpected twists, the ironic viewers prefer to guess at the ending and even anticipate the programme's conclusion. The ironic viewers also particularly appreciate the hybridisation and innovation of the subjects covered, as well as the technical quality (narrative structure) and technology (special effects and the look of the programmes) of the shows. Fanatics, on the other hand, mainly care about the topics and the characters.

Favourite characters, climaxes and gags are the most persistent memories, which vary substantially according to the interviewees' degree of involvement. In contrast to this, however, the structure of the story and even many of the subjects dealt with in the episode or chapter of the pro-

gramme watched seem to be quickly relegated to oblivion, which reveals the importance of selective memory in the processes of interpretation, and possibly the limited nature of the effects of television fiction. There are interviewees of all ages who try to extrapolate the elements of the story to their everyday lives. However, it does not seem that any of the interviewees believe that their real life and fictitious life are an inseparable whole, which is what is claimed by Yolanda Montero based on the results of her study on the Tele5 children's series, «Al salir de clase» (After School; Montero, 2006).

Notes

¹ See the report by A. Lenhart, K. Purcell, A. Smith & K. Zickuhr (2010). Social Media and Young Adults, written for The Pew Internet and American Life Project in 2010. Online: (www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Social-Media-and-Young-Adults.aspx) (14-12-2011).

² According to the «Informe Anual de los Contenidos Digitales en España 2010» (Annual Report of Digital Contents in Spain 2010) by red.es, the decline in the download model in favour of streaming in recent years is due to the change in mindset, primarily among the youngest viewers, who view the reception of contents as a service without the need to have ownership of these contents. (www.red.es/media/registrados/201011/1290073066269.pdf?acceptacion=230ed621b2afb25bab3692b9b951e2c6) (02-12-2011).

³ The «Annual Report of Digital Contents in Spain 2010» by red.es also notes that convenience is the reason that drives most web-based consumers of television and film fiction. (www.red.es/media/registrados/201011/1290073066269.pdf?acceptacion=230ed621b2afb25bab3692b9b951e2c6) (02-12-2011).

⁴ We could cite, for example, the success of «El armario de la tele» (The TV Wardrobe), the shop that commercialises the clothing worn by television characters. (www.elarmariodelatele.com) (09-12-2011).

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