

RESEARCH INTO TV SERIALS – PAST AND PRESENT

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SUMMARY

The theoretical framework for television serials in the nineties can be traced back to the two principal preceding research approaches: the analysis of the representation of gender, race or other social issues based on the narrative structures of the text; and the analysis of the consumption and reception of these serials, in which ethnographic studies play a crucial role.

However, a considerable set of diversified research works by author, areas of origin and interests can be added to the above, aimed at a type of serialised fiction production that has stretched beyond the limits of the traditional models assigned to the Anglo-Saxon and Latin American areas.

A historical and critical review of the most recent research into TV serials enables us to understand the present state of the art of research into which the study of Catalan serials can be inserted.

KEY WORDS

Television, Fiction, Serials (soap operas), Research, Communication

ARTICLE

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However, this area of communicative research has experienced an increase in research undertakings, which over the last few years have diversified the perspectives of analysis of TV serials to such an extent that today we can draw on a considerable set of diversified research works by author, areas of origin interrelated disciplines and interests, aimed at a type of serialised fiction production that has stretched beyond the limits of the traditional models assigned to the Anglo-Saxon and Latin American areas.

The purpose of this article is to present a historical and critical overview of the most recent research into TV serials that will enable us to understand the present state of the art of research, into which the study of Catalan serials can be inserted as an indigenous legacy of this TV fiction tradition. It is structured around three main thematic areas: I) Studies of representation, II) Research into consumption and reception; III) Other research approaches to TV serials in the nineties: interdisciplinary studies, proposals for comprehensive and comparative analysis, and new perspectives.

I) Studies of representation: gender, race, sex and other social issues

The study of soap opera representation of the female sex, social class, race or other issues of a social character has been continuous since research first began, and this has evolved within the framework of communicative theories applicable over the years, and varying on the basis of the contextual interests imprinted upon them

As regards the female sex, the relationship between soap operas and the life lived by women as their main consumers is what has directed the thrust of research work into the soaps' representation of women and the identification that the female viewer may set up with them. Representation and identification are two key concepts in feminist research into cinema and television consumption, which can be extended into the wider framework of Cultural Studies.

Geraghty figures as a direct inheritor of this evolution. Having defined the fragmented narrative structure of these fictions, the aesthetic experience that they propose as a genre and the antecedents of cinematic melodrama, she presented in the nineties a type of textual analysis that was distinct from Modleski's linguistic and psychoanalytic type (1982) and *Screen Theory*, which led to a reappraisal of the conception of the female figure as the "ideal mother".

Geraghty (1991, 1995) analyses narrative structures of a formal nature, focusing on the role defined by the characters in the framework of the family structure that makes sense of their actions. She distinguishes between the public sphere, which can be assimilated to the world of work, and the private sphere, identified as the familiar, affective one. Based on this *schema* she studies the formal conventions and gender limits that are gradually blurred, thus jeopardising female pleasure when new issues are tackled.

She concludes, however, that contrary to feminist presuppositions that claimed for a realist representation of women in this type of serial narration, it is the more idealised and fantastic female characters that give female viewers a chance to judge family values and the patriarchal model (Geraghty, 1991: 107-129). She coincides, therefore, with Feuer (1990) about the possibility of a critical reading of open serials, and with a study focusing on the character of Sue Ellen (*Dallas*) in which Len Ang (1990) deals with the notion of identification. (1)

The concept of identification between viewers and soaps may refer to identification with the particular characters, which extends to the situation in which they find themselves, or else the viewing process, following the premises of Brundson (1981) concerning the active process of reading the soap opera through its serial structure and traditional female capacities for managing the personal sphere. Regarding the latter meaning, Geraghty (1981) had already pointed to speculations made by the audience on the basis of the text, which the *Tubingen* project (Seiter, 1989) would later confirm by describing soap operas as a collective construct.

Yet gender has not proved to be the only central strand in the fabric of representation studies. Geraghty herself (1991) also addresses questions of class, race and sexuality, based on the fact that not only realism but also the melodramatic component and the family as a structural nucleus are specific features of these serials that condition the treatment of certain issues in contemporary social problem areas – particularly in the new British soaps of the eighties – *Eastenders* and *Brookside* – with their realist intentions both as regards style, close to that of British cinema, and content. In these soaps social problems take on a public and personal dimension, linked to such an extent with today's context that some of them have proved controversial due to the immediacy of their impact and the fact that they are so "close" to people in the street. The characters, on the other hand, gradually cease to be "people in the street", subject to realist intentions, in response to a greater demand, that of melodrama, which obliges them to be morally "exemplary" (Geraghty, 1997), and herein lies their formative value.

In this framework, the author proposes an analysis of the issue of race and ethnicity based on the representation of black characters, and the issue of sexuality through the representation of gays and lesbians, and illnesses such as AIDS (Geraghty, 1991: 157-166).

The presence of black characters gives rise to two forms of treatment, depending on whether one or more characters are included, since the lower the number, the greater the representation of the black community. The consequent reduction of the scope for action and participation in the plot, in which they are never the protagonists, shapes them as victims of racial prejudice. There is evidence, however, that multiplying the number of characters does not lead to equivalent role significance or full interaction. This is attributed to the fact that by not wishing to note the difference, there is a tendency to talk of common

problems “without analysing the possibility that there may be different reasons for similar problems” (among them, race).

Some time ago, in his analysis of paradigmatic narrative structure and the three types of possible relationships among characters (family relations, love interest or social links), Robert C. Allen (1985: 75) showed evidence that they are limited for those characters that are “non-white and heterosexual”. By analysing the position of black characters and homosexuals in the narrative structure, Fuqua (1995) also corroborates the fact that the latter are consigned to controversial social issues located outside the community consensus, where they are defined by their sexual or racial option.

As regards the issue of homosexuality, the analysis is often linked with the issue of AIDS, following the presentation of the soaps themselves. The aim is then precisely to “distance” the HIV virus from gay characters by following a consistent strategy that tends to focus on the reaction of the characters surrounding the possible HIV-positive character, as the ones with whom the viewers had to identify.

Despite the adverse results, Geraghty (1997: 197-201) values the role of British soaps positively as a “popular discordant voice” by distancing themselves from the racism and homophobic radicalism of the popular press and their difference from American soap operas, in which gay persons are defined in terms of patriarchal power as female roles and thus deviant from the norm.

However, there are many different studies of the representation of race, gender and social issues in the soap operas and *telenovelas* of the nineties. The internationalisation of serial formats, together with that of the research approaches employed in each of their ambits of origin, has contributed to their diversification. Thus, in the U.S.A., Clark (1995) studied the representation of gays and lesbians in televised fiction, and in soap operas in particular. From a feminist standpoint she traces the issue of sexuality, using as an ideal reference the lesbian melodrama *Two in twenty* (1985) and she brings out the “asexual and de-eroticised” representation of lesbian relationships as a consequence of homophobic pressure, in line with the analysis of relations of friendship between women in Geraghty (1991: 158).

Among the countries to which soap operas have been exported, thus stimulating the production of local serials, we find the study by Frey-Vor (1995) from the structuralist/semiotic perspective of the German television drama *Lindenstrafe* (ARD 1985), which, in addition to its content, deals with the production context and analyses reception in comparative terms with the British *Eastenders*.

Other significant studies are those by Stempel into the representation of paternity and those by Griffiths and Rofel into national identity and culture, all of which have been collected in the volume *par excellence* of the nineties, that by Allen (1995). As regards the representation of race and ethnicity, Bramlett-Solomon and Farwell (1996), subscribing to the analysis by Geraghty (1991) study the multi-ethnic community in *Eastenders*, while the generic work by Daniels and Gerson (1989) endorses the thesis of displacement or

the incomplete integration of black and Asiatic characters and criticises the use of stereotypes that reduce racism to factors of individual character and non-socio-structural ones.

In the other leading research ambit, Latin America, studies of national identity and the treatment of social issues (public health, schooling, etc.) are especially significant. In this latter ambit two interrelated tendencies can be observed: on the one hand, the interdisciplinary nature of studies into the representation of social aspects of a public nature in soap operas with a realist format and the educational interest that motivates a large part of the research into these soap operas and, on the other, those studies that follow the “pro-development” movement in Mexico and Venezuela in the late seventies.

With regard to the interdisciplinary nature, it is worth underlining the great importance of demographic studies, particularly Brazilian ones, in the analysis of soap operas as elements that intervene in the complex process of promotion of public policy, as reflected in the thesis by Ortega (2002: 84-108). What is established, in one word, is a correlation of demographic studies between texts and contexts before and after the broadcast. This is a type of study of the spreading of educational messages through the media that also extends to other underdeveloped nations in Africa.

Ortega's methodological design (2002: 113-137) differs from the above research work in its renouncing the application of quantitative methods in the analysis of the text from demographic categories and constructing an *ad hoc* qualitative model focusing on two main thrusts: socio-demographic change and gender relationships, with which she studies Catalan serials for the first time.

Yet studies linked with the educational context extend beyond demographic applications. A significant number of research endeavours into the educational function of soap operas, which work on the gap between representation and the effective function of promotion and social education (Rogers; Antola, 1989; Singhal, 1993; Fuenzalida, 1992, 1996) can be found within the framework of communicative research in Latin America. Fuenzalida's work in Chile is a fine example of this, as this is a context that is closer to the pro-development model in Mexico than to the more modernised Brazilian one. It studies not only contents but also the way in which gender can educate in issues like public health or legislation, by insisting on the melodramatic component as the key factor in the educational appropriation of texts via mechanisms of identification and projection; in other words, in a manner that is more emotional than rational.

Research from an educational standpoint that shares with the general tendency of soap opera and *telenovela* studies in the nineties in re-directing research from analysis of the text to the study of the context for reception and consumption.

II) Research into consumption and reception. The importance of ethnographic analysis

The analysis of reception and consumption of media products in the nineties finds theoretical support in the notion of productive consumption, the distinction between use and interpretation, and the *Theory of Resistance* (Fiske, 1987). Semiotic/structural analysis (Greimas, 1971) is consolidated, as it enables us to analyse the deep structures of texts, which are polysemic by definition; or, alternatively, the analysis of the different readings or uses of texts.

Presuppositions in the process of the production of meaning ascribed to the viewer were confirmed by the research work into trans-cultural reception in the eighties (Katz; Liebes; Ang, 1985), in which it was shown that viewers “do not necessarily adopt the representations that the media have put into circulation with regard to models of reality” (Grandi, 1995: 247). In this theoretical context research into soap operas and *telenovelas* is undertaken on the basis of analysis of the conversations between viewers, from which the serial's meaning is constructed. Brown's analysis (1994) from the feminist standpoint, in the framework of British and American Cultural Studies from which it takes its theoretical and methodological referents, is one of the foremost ones in this respect. Her proposal of a “theory of female discourse”, according to which women establish their emancipating readings in the shelter of the dialogic process from which the soap opera or *telenovela* are jointly interpreted, is worth emphasising.

The reassessment of the role of women in the process of resistance to hegemony in the framework of the private, domestic sphere makes an important contribution to televised melodramas through the dialogue set up by women's knowledge in female discourse networks, where it is shown that female viewers in no instance are compelled to renounce their pleasure, nor their textual or gender capacities, but rather that they assume their cultural inheritance and the strategic knowledge of their activity and their position as women.

The results cannot be generalised but they are conclusive as regards the four important features for the generating of emancipating readings in conversations on soap operas: the motivating of communication, the establishing of spaces exclusive of commentary, strategic awareness (of gender and text) and the derogation of normative control mechanisms (through laughter, and criticism in the private context).

Hobson's more comprehensive research (1990) can be situated in this same input from ethnographic work. It deals with television's integrating capacity in the daily conversations of women carried on in the workplace. The study confirms the audience's active participation, its textual and gender competence, and the ease with which viewers appropriate television texts, without even the need to see them directly. Above all, however, they confirm that the processes of identification do not occur so much with the character as with the situation in which viewers encounter a point of comparison with their own experiences.

This conceptualisation of active social consumption has also led to an exploration of new spaces for the construction of femininity. Spence (1995) is another exponent of the Anglo-Saxon experience, whereas in the Latin American sphere we meet with research into reception that is interested in the representation of women and their social promotion: Quiroz and Márquez (1997), or the study of ways of seeing (media/popular culture, urban/rural surroundings) by Sonia Muñoz (1995).

Going beyond the perspective of gender, we have the analysis of youth, family and trans-cultural reception. Worth mentioning among the ethnographic studies of reception by youth networks is the work by Fouassier (1997) on French television serials and the work by the Spanish researcher Peñamarín (1999) on Spanish young people's serials, based on the review of Ricouer's (1985) concept of narrative thought that Bruner (1996) and Schaeffer (1999) undertake from the standpoint of narrative and cognitive psychology.

Research into the family context of the reception of *telenovelas* has representative work like that of Barrios (1998) in Venezuela and that of Covarrubias and others (1994) in Mexico, with a theoretical approach close to social constructionism, the sociology of daily life and ethno-methodology.

The latter proves especially significant for its attempt to integrate the ethnographic micro-study of the family as a unit of reception but also as a micro-reality, in a broader approach to reality as a macro-structure. The theoretical presuppositions are those of the qualitative sociology of Schwartz and Jacobs (1984) and the method for the *reconstruction* of social reality: the ethnographic approach to the family as reduced representation. (2)

The notion of everyday life that Covarrubias and others (1994) adopt from the work by Heller (1977) enables them to contemplate what is present in it of mediation between micro-levels of social organisation like the family and macro-levels like the state. It is this dimension of social mediator that links the research by Covarrubias and others (1994) with the research approach of Morley (1986), Silverstone (1991) or Llull (1988) and social customs.

The results of their research can be synthesised into a typology of uses of television in the family, divided into the conscious and the unconscious, which follows the approach by Llull (1988), although what is more relevant is their categorisation of what they term "social uses explicit during consumption of the *telenovela*" (Covarrubias, 1994: 199-200), which we may summarise as: educational function, preventive medium, cultural representation, cognitive social orientation and cathartic use. This taxonomy enables us to read *telenovelas* in their role as *constructors of social reality*, as they offer representations of everyday life that are assumed as forms of education, knowledge and social legitimisation. Thus, they complement the research into the educational function of the *telenovela* by Fuenzalida (1996), with whom they share the approach based on the notion of everyday life and the emotional component.

Lastly, we must consider the research approach to the trans-cultural reception of soap operas and the study of the construction of identities that had significant representatives in the nineties in Miller (1995), Gillespie (1995a, b) and Barker (1999). The former studied the reception of an American soap opera in Trinidad, a serial that was highly successful, according to Miller (1995) because of its adaptation to the local culture's practices and requirements of the concept of reception, rather than from the narrative and formal characteristics of the genre.

In addition, ethnographic research into the reception of the Australian soap opera *Neighbours* by Gillespie (1995a, b) focuses on a group of young Asians from the *diaspora* in London, about whom the study concludes that they use the serial to reflect, question and debate their own attitudes and behaviour in relation to the norms and values that they have to articulate in a society that is different from that of their parents. For his part, Barker (1999) studies the reception of soap operas in British Asian and Afro-Caribbean adolescents in order to determine the use that they make of soaps as a recourse for the discursive construction of multiple cultural identities.

Embodying other purposes and study perspectives we might mention the research work into the reception of internationalised productions such as that of Crofts (1995) into factors for success or failure, or that of Baldwin (1995) or Ana M. López (1995) into the exporting of soaps and *telenovelas*.

Criticism of ethnography and the prioritising of the analysis of reception, however, also leave their mark on the orientation of some contemporary researchers. To the already well-known criticisms articulated by Modleski (1989) can be added critics of audience relativism and "academic enthusiasm for the (re)discovery of pleasure", who defend analysis of the text as the central element in all research into the production of the signified. On the opposing side stand those who criticise the abandoning of the study of production, rejecting the equivalence of producer and consumer in terms of the elaboration of the signified (MORLEY, 1996: 434).

III) Other research approaches to television serials in the nineties: the inter-disciplinary factor, proposals for a comprehensive and comparative analysis, new perspectives

The present research panorama regarding soap operas permits diversification in the orientations of the studies, which can be grouped, in large measure, into the three classic lines of approach: emitter, text and reception. Having seen the central corpus of the latter, we must consider what other research approaches can be encountered in the present research melting pot.

The approach made by the semiotic textual analysis of genre in the eighties continues in the framework of research into text analysis, keeping to historical evolution and the modernisation of the genre, with the work of Steimberg (1997) and Traversa (1997).

In Latin America semiotic analysis has been mainly oriented towards the study of genre and the notions of trans-genre and inter-textuality, with Mazzioti's (1992, 1993) work being important in this respect. The Argentinian author starts out from the definition of the narrative proto-structure of the *telenovela* made by Quiroz (1987) – an ahistorical story, a rigidly stratified, pre-industrial society, and a Manichean vision of character and situation – and analyses “the elements converging in the melting pot of the *telenovela* defining it as an ‘inter-textual’ genre (generically)” (Escudero, 1996: 3).

Other contributions to the de-fictionalisation of the genre are those by Ciamberlani (1997) and Puppo (1997), or those by Ramos Trinta (1997) on hyper-reality and fictionalisation, which are close to Ang and Stratton (1995) on post-realism. Or the semiotic analysis of romantic fiction by Pozzato (1995b) and the academic work in Spain by Zermeño (1997) on “the foreseeable” as a narrative strategy of the *telenovela*, following the approach to the revelation of the secret as a narrative motor by Escudero (1996). (3)

In the field of research into soap operas and *telenovelas*, the work that addresses the study of the broadcaster is relatively scarce. In addition to the study by Ang (1991) of interviews with producers, we have the synthesis by Kilborn (1992), which is documented on the basis of reports by some of the producers of British soaps, and that by Grisprud (1990) on the American soap opera *Dynasty*, defending the analysis of the text and the study of the producer.

Additional reference should be made to the work by Tulloch (1990) on soap operas in the Anglo-Saxon context based on the concept of agency applied both to viewers and producers in the circulation of myths through televised drama, and those research works that integrate the study of the broadcaster into a wider reflection on production styles or other related features, like those of Kreutzer and others (1995) or Butler (1995).

Moreover, Latin America continues with its studies of the production of *telenovelas* and the distinctive features of each country, particularly Brazil, which is growing in terms of exporting and updating (Klagsbrunn, 1997; Simoes Borelli, 1997; Tufte, 2000).

The interdisciplinary factor

During the nineties, research into the reception context of *telenovelas* and soap operas opened up new avenues of investigation that broadened the scope of analysis to the television medium, such as the research by Livingstone (1990) into the social psychology of the television viewer and the audience's

interpretation of everyday social texts, particularly British soap operas, on which she based her empirical research. This is an interdisciplinary proposal falling between social (especially cognitive) psychology, social representation, the theory of discourse and the study of the media.

Following the approach drawn up by Hobson (1982) or Dyer and others (1981), according to which the resolutions of conflicts addressed by soaps are always individual and socio-political solutions are therefore excluded, Livingstone (1990) contemplates as the key issue the situations addressed by the relationships between the characters, bearing in mind the theoretical approaches that contemplate social interaction as a source of awareness.

She employs the concept of *para-social interaction*, adopted from Horton and Wohl (1956) and concentrates on characters and the interpretation that viewers make of them. Unlike Geraghty (1991), she does not contemplate them as bi-dimensional, while “realistic but melodramatic”. Rather, she distinguishes between them according to whether they are more or less stereotyped or ambiguous, believing that one of the reasons is the number of characters and therefore the degree of diversification/distribution of features.

She applies a technique of analysis on a multi-dimensional scale based on the metaphor of semantic space in order to study the representation of the characters made by viewers. (4) By showing the divergence between structural analyses and the interpretations made by the viewers, she concludes that the latter have to be studied in relation to the structure of the text, thus invalidating to a certain extent the importance of the analysis of the narrative structures of previous years.

What is most important is that she demonstrates that “viewers are capable of constructing a coherent representation of the characters” (Livingstone, 1990: 143) and from this the *para-social interaction* that they maintain. The door is opened to a conception of these characters as “real persons” and not as narrative roles, returning to an analysis that equates fiction and reality in the sense that they are understood from the same parameters.

Hers is a research approach that aligns itself with research into the reception of soap operas and *telenovelas* that has been mainstream since the eighties and which has pointed to the analysis of the audience’s different interpretations in accordance with its social position and its interpretation context.

Comprehensive proposals

Martín Barbero’s work has been fundamental for the Latin American research context over the last two decades as it enables us to survey the main issues explored: national identity, popular culture and mass culture, television and daily life, or the representation of social reality in the serials.

This is research that distances itself from both semiotics and anthropology and focuses on the description of staging devices and symbolic storylines that come from melodrama on the one hand, and that of the cultural matrices that come from newspaper serials, on the other. This enables him to study the activation of cultural memory on the strength of the stories shared by the public, in the present context, via the *telenovela*.

The strategies of analysis employed can be summarised in three major approaches that correspond to the three classic study perspectives in communication (broadcaster, text and reception): production structure and dynamics, social customs and ways of seeing, and textual composition.

As regards production structure and dynamics, he studies competition within the industry and the communicative competence of the producing agents in recognising audiences, as well as the process of production of the genre and professional routines.

As regards social customs and ways of seeing he analyses TV consumption habits and family routines (focusing on the figure of the housewife), spaces for circulation and “re-semanticising” (the home, the local area, the workplace and meeting place), and collective cultural and imaginary capacities, on the basis of which the different social, ethnic, racial or regional groups read *telenovelas* and project their identity (by studying the viewers’ accounts of what they have seen).

The third major approach, that of textual composition, is the one that studies the *telenovela* as text, both from the definition of genre and from the social reality to which it makes reference. Starting out from a negation of the transplanting of reality to the *telenovela*, he recognises the function of melodrama as a matrix that facilitates the study of the transformation of the world of everyday life into narrative. The levels of analysis are: the material of the representation, the structure of the imaginary, the form of the story and the language of the medium.

Although Martín Barbero locates the elements that enable him to elaborate a discourse on the social reality represented in *telenovela* texts on the first of these levels, he bears in mind the form in which the latter are presented and the symbolic and cultural imaginary faculty to which they remit. This enables him to speak not only in terms of representation of a social reality but also of the maintaining and reconstructing of the collective imaginary faculty.

Wide-ranging models of comparative analysis

We emphasise here two wide-ranging research initiatives: the comparative analysis proposed by O’Donnell (1999) and the work of *Eurofiction*, the observatory for European fiction.

The former proposes a complex analytical model in its attempt to bring together in a single research initiative the study of the broadcaster, text analysis and a minimum approximation to viewer perspective through press publications on soap operas. His study extends to the number of European countries that produce serials, with the purpose of setting up a global understanding of Western European soap operas.

His working framework focuses on four areas of interest: extra- and inter-textual factors; text (technical and linguistic features); three narrative levels: micro-narrative (individual stories), meta-narrative (current affairs) and macro-narrative (type of society constructed); and two dimensions of narration: trans-narrative (in relation to other fictions in the reception context) and hyper-narrative (living myth).

Despite the comprehensive thrust of his model, his interpretation of the extra- and intra-textual factors is debatable – which can be recognised in the approach by Cantor and Pingree (1983) – and the ambitious scope of the sample ends up blurring the vision of the text as the seat of a complex process of negotiation between producers and consumers: the consumer does not form part of the study if it is not in relation to the presuppositions of the text, and the analysis of the latter is complicated by the wish to include the trans-narrative level and to establish a relationship between soap opera and society, which is of necessity an over-simplification. Despite this, it is an attempt to approach soap operas as a space for the production of meaning that is practically unique for its dimension, and a documented descriptive reading of the European scene.

Eurofiction, on the other hand, concentrates its efforts on the analysis of the television fiction proper to each one of the European countries involved, understood as an industrial and cultural product, yet without attempting to contextualise it with any socio-cultural analysis of the producing countries.

If we keep in mind that research into TV serials evolves in an interactive network, we shall see that one of the added values of *Eurofiction* is that it incorporates the results of the specific work of each one of the teams involved. The socio-semiotic analysis of Lacalle (2003) is one such endeavour, whereas in Italy Buonanno's study of national identities, values and social contents transmitted by televised fiction, the most popular product of televised story-telling in each country, is key. (5)

The concepts and study methods that go into shaping her theoretical framework have as their principal referents, on the one hand, the social phenomenology of Schutz (1964, 1974), starting from which she investigates the status of reality in fiction worlds and, on the other, the ritual view of communication by Carey (1988), regarding the theoretical perspective from which she defines the communication media and the televised text.

Televised fiction understood as a "relating" of society becomes coherent with the approach of phenomenological sociology "in the Schutzian mould" that she will adopt in dealing with the regulation of fiction, which is close to that of Covarrubias and others (1994). In this way, the three main functions of TV

serials proposed by Buonanno (1999: 62-67) can be compared with the typology of social customs of Covarrubias and others (1994): fabulation, familiarisation and maintenance of the community (without forgetting that fiction records both tradition and trends leading to change). Buonanno (1999) sees TV fiction narratives as part of, or participating in, the social construction of reality, but in no case as imposed or assumed directly.

In addition, adopting the Schutzian perspective will solve what she terms an “epistemological equivocation” that spans two decades of research into soap operas: the relationship between reality and fiction. In an approach close to that of Ang (1982) with regard to the two levels of realism (empirical and emotive), Buonanno denounces an erroneous judgement on the part of fiction in starting from an “altogether objective and positivist conception of reality, from which it effaces all subjective, symbolic and imaginary components and constitutes it, proud and clear, with respect to its representations” (Buonanno, 1999: 59). According to the Italian critic, this is the reason why representations are judged in terms of truth or falsehood, establishing degrees of relationship with respect to the objective reality of reference.

It is obvious for Buonanno that there are spaces of overlapping and interaction between the reality of fiction and that of the everyday world and she comes out on the side of the research approach that contemplates the situations addressed in soaps as a means of understanding the world for the viewers. Her methodological proposal represents an alternative to the textual analyses of a formal nature (roles and structures) that have been applied to studies of representation in the serials, because this is an analysis of a phenomenological nature that contemplates the character as a person and his or her actions as social behaviour. It is in this sense that the contribution by Livingstone (1990) from the social psychology standpoint endorses and anticipates this type of analysis from the standpoint of the TV viewer.

Buonanno (1999) opens up a new perspective by situating a theoretical framework for a definition of the status of fiction and the function of TV storytelling, thereby constituting itself as one of the leading referents for situating a proposal for analysing Catalan TV serials as transmitters of social values and an ideal point for bringing to a close this necessarily brief overview of the nineties.

NOTES

(1) Ang (1990) analyses the reception of *Dallas* based on identification with the female character, Sue Ellen, by describing three stages: fantasy, pleasure, and the negotiation of femininity. The value of this research lies in its conceptualisation of fictional characters: not as “realist images of women, but as textual constructions of possible *modes of femininity*” (Grandi, 1995: 275).

(2) It is worth mentioning that criticism of qualitative research of an ethnographic nature has always considered the low representative character and significance of the micro-studies undertaken to be a weak point. These authors declare this from a different sociological point of view. They start with the idea that reality is not only structured but also structures, so that the analysis of the structures of these micro-realities or family units can help to understand the structuring of reality itself as a macro-structure. They attempt to *reconstruct*, in the sense of understanding social reality (understood as a reality made up of ideologies, power relationships, communication and mediation systems in the practices, hierarchies of social and cultural values) based on the data collected from the study of daily routines and situations and the meanings and motivations of individuals as receivers. Individuals are considered within their families, as minimum representations of this social reality.

(3) Escudero (1996) believes it is necessary to make a tri-directional movement in order to transform the *telenovela* into a theoretical object: make it into a genre, link it into the TV system, from which the cognitive and consumption effect can be studied, and, in the last analysis, give it back its status as text beyond the series in which it is framed. From this perspective, she undertakes the analysis of the “secret as a narrative vehicle” of *telenovelas* (Escudero, 1996, 1997), a discursive strategy of revelation and suspense.

(4) She applies two theories: the theory of *stereotyping* or *gender schema* and the theory of the *Implicit Personality*, and starting from both of these she constructs a semantic representation (a multi-dimensional space) in which the characters are located according to their traits of character (implicit), attributed by viewers on the basis of a questionnaire in which they have to evaluate numerically the personality traits proposed in binary opposites (Livingstone, 1990: 113). The author establishes a point in common between cognitive social psychology and semiotics, which is that both believe that the signified lies in the similarities and differences between signs; and in the relationship between signs and the referents of the real world (Livingstone, 1990: 108). The difference is that psychology does not study narrative, but knowledge or semantic maps (representations).

(5) For a fuller approach to the concept of storytelling, see: Buonanno, M. (2002). We have pointed above to the concept of *fictionscape* in this same publication, which proves particularly clarifying for the theoretical perspective adopted by the Italian author as regards the definition of fiction in its bardic function.

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