

Soap Operas: A Women's Space? The Case of Catalan *culebrons*

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If we consider television as a powerful ideological apparatus and feminism as a resistance theory, it becomes evident why television content has been a focus of feminist studies from early on in the development of gender studies. Analysing how patriarchal ideology excludes, silences, and oppresses women inevitably leads to the analysis of the processes and practices that produce ideas about what it means to be a woman in culture (McCabe and Akass 2006: 108). In this sense, gender representations in the media, especially television, acquire a significant importance, due to its 'power of representation to promote or contest domination' (Moseley and Read 2002: 238).

Entertainment plays a crucial role in this sense because even without being 'primarily a vehicle for the transmission of ideas [...] even the most emotionally saturated entertainment will also produce ideas, and these will certainly be locatable in terms of ideology' (Lovell 1981: 47). Even fictional shows convey strong messages about 'what is normal, good, strange, or dangerous' (Capsuto 2000: 1). Initial feminist interest in television was, in the words of Charlotte Brunsdon, Julie D'Acci, and Lynn Spigel, a call 'to action growing out of the deep conviction that women's oppression was very much related to mass media representations and that change was not only urgent, but possible' (1997: 5).

Initially, feminist television criticism mainly focused on one specific genre, that of soap opera. In my article I will query the prominence of soap opera analysis in feminist television studies and will investigate how this genre addresses an audience which has traditionally been constructed as 'female'. I will intersect this review of feminist studies of audience analysis with my own examination of comments left by viewers on the official internet forum maintained by Televisió de Catalunya, the Catalan public television service. Finally, I will examine how Catalan soaps have approached social issues from

a gender perspective and I will query the pedagogical aspirations of the Catalan public television service in this sense.

‘Soap’ has always been, and to a certain extent still is, ‘a term of derision, an expression which implied an over-dramatic, under-rehearsed presentation of trivial dramas blown up out of all proportion to their importance’ (Geraghty 1991: 1). Jane Root has pointed out that the fact that ‘soap operas are seen as female has helped to bring the whole form into disrepute’ (1986: 68). Soap operas’ viewers have always been denied the recognition of an active role and are generally represented as deluded and gullible persons, as it is demonstrated by several mainstream entertainment products, such as Hollywood films. *Nurse Betty* (Neil LaBute 2000), for example, is about a woman who, after witnessing her husband’s murder, seeks to escape from reality and to try to find refuge in the world of her favourite soap opera. The film, therefore, exploits the stereotype of soaps’ viewers as incapable of distinguishing reality from fiction. In *Tootsie* (Sydney Pollack 1982), the female viewers of the fictional soap opera *Southwest General* are also seen as addicted to daytime television and, thus, intellectually shallow.

Faced with simplistic and stereotyped views regarding soap operas’ audience of the sort reflected in *Tootsie* and *Nurse Betty*, feminist television studies attempts to elaborate a richer understanding of the relationship between knowledge and belief in the viewing process, analysing how viewers actively manipulate the boundary between fiction and reality—a manipulation which is often considered to constitute one of the most appealing aspects of soap operas. As Ang suggests ‘it is in this world of the imagination that watching melodramatic soap operas like *Dallas* can be pleasurable: *Dallas* offers a starting point for the melodramatic imagination, nourishes, makes it concrete’ (Ang 1985: 80). Thus, feminist interest in soaps has played a crucial role in re-evaluating this genre and the pleasures it may offer to an audience constructed as female, rather than dismissing it as inherently worthless as some other approaches not informed by feminism have done.

One of the reasons for feminist interest in soap operas is precisely that, although the programming schedule¹ and the history of this genre shift from one national context to another, one aspect of soap opera does seem consistent across national boundaries: its historical association with a spectatorship constructed as female. As Laura Stempel Mumford points out, the persistence of the image of soap opera as a 'women's genre' to this day does not tell us much about 'actual' audiences, but it does call attention to the fact that soap opera narrative requires of the viewer 'a set of knowledge and skills normally associated with women in patriarchal culture' (1995: 45). However, the idea that there is a specific relationship between soap opera and women viewers has been questioned by more recent work such as David Gauntlett and Annette Hill's (1999) five-year study of four hundred and fifty British viewers. According to this study, soap operas have changed inasmuch as there is less emphasis on female characters' stories and the network of talk and discussion that surrounds the series is not exclusively for women. Furthermore, the male respondents considered in this study generally did not find it difficult to admit that they watched soaps and, more broadly, the viewers who took part in this project avoid distinction between 'women's' and 'men's interests' in television viewing (Gauntlett and Hill 1999: 219).

Similarly, Robert Allen argues that 'new groups have discovered soap operas' (1985: 3), including university students, men, and adolescents. To some extent this kind of critique has been backed up by other studies, such as David Buckingham's (1987) work on children's viewing; Marie Gillespie's (1994) on teenagers; and John Tulloch's (1989) on the elderly. On the contrary, there has been relatively little analysis of male viewership of soap operas, even though the few studies which have been conducted reveal that men receive 'the same pleasure which women have been documented as obtaining from the genre. Whilst this is not true of all men, many of our subjects revealed themselves to be active interpreters of a genre which has excluded them for a long time'² (Prescott 1998). These

¹ They can be daily or weekly soaps, for example.

² <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Students/acp9601.html>.

theories seem corroborated by the data presented by Marta Ortega in her studies of Catalan soap opera *Poblenou*.³ She reports that sixty-two per cent of the viewers were women, whereas men constituted thirty-eight per cent of the audience, therefore being certainly a minority, but a fairly significant one. As far as age-group is concerned, twenty-nine per cent of the audience was between forty-five and sixty-four years old; twenty-seven per cent between twenty-five and forty-four; twenty-three per cent more than sixty-five; eighteen per cent between thirteen and twenty-four; and three per cent between four and twelve. Therefore, even if it is true that the main audience is included in the age range between twenty-five and sixty-four (fifty-six per cent of the total), the percentage of young and teenage audience is significant since it amounts to twenty-one per cent (Ortega 2002: 174). In the figures presented by Vilches, Berciano, and Lacalle (1999: 30-31) on Catalan soap opera *Nissaga de poder*,⁴ we can detect a slight decrease in the percentage of male viewers (thirty-one per cent) compared to *Poblenou*, but a strong increase in the appeal of the genre for children and teenagers. Indeed, in November 1998—in other words a month in which the usual TV schedule is not disrupted by holidays or special events—*Nissaga de poder* was able to obtain a 40.7% share of the audience among children between four and twelve, which was higher than other programmes specifically targeted at teenagers, such as the daily youth series *El joc de viure* (Vilches, Berciano, and Lacalle 1999: 43). In the interview I conducted with him on 17 May 2011, Josep Maria Benet i Jornet⁵ comments ironically on what he sees as the misinterpretation of soap operas' audience as female:

Aquestes sèries [...] no les veuen només la gent popular i les dones, les veuen advocats i polítics i les veu tothom, el que passa és que dissimulen!
El meu dentista em deia 'la meva mare es veu aquesta sèrie que tu portes

³ *Poblenou* was broadcast from 10 January to 25 December 1994.

⁴ *Nissaga de poder* was broadcast from 28 January 1996 to 3 January 1998.

⁵ Josep Maria Benet i Jornet is a Catalan theatre and television writer. He is the creator of Catalan soaps such as *Poblenou* and *Ventdelplà*.

i et pregunta tal cosa' i t'ho explicava. Què dius ta mare, ets tu! I ta mare de passada, si vols, però ets tu que te la mires.⁶

These remarks notwithstanding, other surveys show that women are still the most engaged viewers of soaps. A British survey published in 2002 by the Broadcasting Standards Commission found that the most strongly committed viewers of primetime soap operas were predominantly working-class women. Other studies indicate that women in general have a different kind of engagement with soap operas when compared with other groups (Geraghty 2006: 133).

However, even in assuming an audience in which women predominate, neither producers nor critics can further assume that women are a consistent or unchanging category. Nevertheless, according to Geraghty, the importance of soaps in Western culture as a litmus test of the 'feminine' cannot be ignored (1991: 40). In her opinion, if soaps are considered women's fiction, it is not just because of the stories they tell, but because of the way their viewers feel about these programmes (2006: 132). Indeed, in her study of *Crossroads*, Hobson points out that 'it is criticised for its technical or script inadequacies, without seeing that its greatest strength is in its stories and connections with its audiences' (1982: 170-171). This sense of identification is evident in some of the comments left on Televisió de Catalunya's official forum when two of the most popular Catalan soaps ended: *El cor de la ciutat*—broadcast from 11 September 2000 to 23 December 2009—and *Ventdelplà*—broadcast from 14 February 2005 to 17 October 2010. This is a message left by Lledò on the *Ventdelplà* forum on 24 October 2010:⁷

⁶ 'These series [...] are not only watched by lower class people and women, they are also watched by lawyers and politicians, everybody, but they won't admit it! My dentist would say to me: "My mother watches this series you're writing and she would like to ask you this". What are you talking about? Your mother? It's you! And your mother watches it as well, but it is you who watch it'.

⁷ <http://forums.tv3.cat/viewforum.php?f=302>.

Al llarg dels 5 anys ens hem sentit identificats amb els personatges, personalment tinc un pare mortut com el Jaume, la meu [sic] mare va patir un càncer al mateix temps que la Teresa, el meu fill de 6 anys té una semblança al Biel, al meu marit li encanta la Teresa i a mi el Julià [...]. Connexió crec que es [sic] la paraula que resumeix lo nostre amb Ventdelpla [sic].⁸

Similar messages were left by viewers on the *El cor de la ciutat* forum⁹, such as this one by Scorpion on 23 July 2009, who wrote that the programme comprised: ‘Historias dignas de recordar como en la vida real’.¹⁰ Other messages show how this identification with the characters and storylines cause a sense of sadness and nostalgia when soaps end. Marta left this message on the *Ventdelplà* forum on 24 October 2010:

Em fa molta pena que s’acabi. Porto tants anys veient la sèrie...que sembla com si una part de mi marxi. Tinc tantes anècdotes amb Vent del pla [sic]: [...] un capítol vist amb les companyes d’universitat a l’habitació de l’hotel de Tenerife en el viatge de final de carrera. [...] Vent del Pla [sic] s’acaba però quedarà en el record.¹¹

Likewise, on the *El cor de la ciutat* forum, Bepella posted this message on 23 December 2009: ‘Que [sic] veurem ara mentre dinem?’

⁸ ‘For the last five years we have felt identified with the characters, personally I have a surly father like Jaume, my mother suffered from cancer at the same time as Teresa did, my son is six years old and he looks a little bit like Biel, my husband really likes Teresa and I really like Julià [...]. Connection I think is the word that sums up our relationship with Ventdelpla [sic].’

⁹ <http://www.tv3.cat/pprogrames/elcordelaciutat/corSeccio.jsp>

¹⁰ ‘Stories that deserve to be remembered as in real life’.

¹¹ ‘I’m so sad that it’s over. I have been watching the series for many years...it seems like a piece of me is going as well. I have so many anecdotes about Vent del pla [sic]: an episode seen with friends from university in the hotel room in Tenerife on our holidays after graduation [...] Vent del Pla [sic] is over but it will remain in our memory’.

hem molta, molta pena :(¹² ja m'he acostumat al peris [sic] i a tothom despres [sic] de tants anys es [sic] com si ens deixesis vidus'.¹³ However, not all comments are positive and some of them express negative reactions. Most of the time this is due to the disappointment that some viewers felt about the finale, especially as far as happy endings and the breakup of relationships are concerned. This message was left by Chumm2 on *El cor de la ciutat* forum on 24 December 2009:

Doncs això estic INDIGNAT! perquè han de deixar-ho així [sic]?????
No ens podien fer una mica contents amb el David i la Marta junts? com diu el Peris estan fets l'un per l'altre i després de tot el que els ha passat (bo i dolent) no poden acabar d'una altra [sic] manera que JUNTS!!!¹⁴

This same strong emotional bond with soaps' storylines is expressed in another message left by mire_vdp on 17 July 2010, which shows that identification with the characters can also generate negative reactions. When fantasies are not satisfied, viewers feel betrayed:

[T]ot té un límit, i veure a [sic] la Teresa i en Julià com la 'parelleta feliç' ha sigut la gota que ha fet vessar el got. Per aquí NO hi passo. M'he negat a veure les escenes romàntiques entre aquest parell. NO NO i NO. [...] Des del capítol número [sic] 1 ens van vendre que la base de la sèrie eren els personatges de la Teresa i en David, i la seva relació, i tots els problemes que tenien per estar junts. Aquesta era la base de la sèrie.¹⁵

¹² The punctuation in this sentence is used as an emoticon, in this case one which represents a sad expression.

¹³ 'What are we going to watch now when we eat? We are very, very sad. I am used to peris and everybody else, after so many years it is like being bereaved'.

¹⁴ 'I am OUTRAGED! Why did they end it like this????? Couldn't they make us happy with David and Marta together? As Peris says, they are made for each other and after everything that has happened (good or bad) they can't end up but TOGETHER!'.

¹⁵ 'Everything has a limit and seeing Teresa and Julià as the "happy couple" is the last straw. I am NOT swallowing this. I refuse to watch romantic

I maintain that these responses lend weight to Hobson's argument that the connection between soap operas and their audiences is the genre's greatest strength. However, Tania Modleski problematises the general tendency of disregarding viewers' relationship with soap characters as an 'over-identification':

Soap operas tend more than any other form to break down the distance required for the proper working of identification. But rather than seeing these cases as pathological instances of *over-identification* [...] I would argue that they point to a different *kind* of relationship between spectator and characters that can be described in the words of Irigaray as 'nearness'. The viewer does not become the characters [...] but rather relates to them as intimates, as extensions of her world. (1983: 68-69)

I am now going to discuss some of the most relevant work on the implications and meanings that soap opera narrative has for an audience constructed as female. Many scholars have, indeed, commented on soaps' ability to 'spread their hermeneutic entanglements well beyond the television set and to engage their audiences in the process of discussion' (Geraghty 1991: 5).

Dorothy Hobson's (1989) work stresses that the process by which people make television relevant, meaningful, and pleasurable might begin with watching programmes at home, but the trajectory of that process carries it far beyond the immediate viewing environment. Feminist critics such as Brown have argued that soap viewing is accompanied by female-dominated talk, a process which links mothers, daughters, and friends in a 'women's oral culture that bridges geographic distances' (1994: 85). She argues that 'the sense-making that people engage in when they talk about television may be as important as their actual viewing of the television program' (1994: 2). She interprets this 'micropolitical' activity of women's conversations

scenes between these two. NO NO and NO [...] Since episode one they sold us the idea that the foundations of the series were the characters of Teresa and David and their relationship and all the obstacles they had to face in order to be together. This was the foundation of the series'.

around soap operas as potentially emancipatory, considering that social changes are often the result of the sharing of experiences. In this sense, she maintains, through their networks of gossip about soap opera, women can generate resistive meanings. The importance of soap as a space for networking is expressed by several comments left on Catalan soap operas' official forums, such as this message left by Aida on the *Ventdelplà* forum on 24 October 2010:

Jo encara hem [sic] recordo, de 4 o 5 anys, que tots els de la classe es reunien a comentar el capítol del dia anterior i jo encara no ho mirava i no m'enterava [sic] de res. Un bon dia vaig començar jo també a fer-ho fins avui mateix.¹⁶

Many feminist studies of soap have analysed, as another possible reason for soap opera's success among women viewers, its formal structure, in particular its multiple narrative lines, which constitute a non-linear plot.

Rather than being based around a single resolving plot line, soap operas 'disperse their narrative energy among a constantly changing set of interrelated plots, which may merge, overlap, diverge, fragment, close off, and open us again over a viewing period of several years' (Allen 1992: 108). According to Chandler, this narrative structure invites viewers to interpret events from the perspective of characters similar to themselves and to offer their own comments (1994) —a process allowed by the lack of a privileged moral perspective entailed by such multinarrativity. It is from this perspective that Buckingham defines soap opera as a form of collective game, stressing the importance of viewers' participation in interpretation and construction of meaning.

Perhaps the most appropriate metaphor for soap-opera is to regard it as a form of collective game, in which viewers themselves are the major participants. The programme itself provides a basis for

¹⁶ 'I still remember that four or five years ago everybody in my class met to comment on the episode shown the day before and I hadn't started to watch it yet and didn't understand anything. One day I began to watch it and have done since then until today'.

the game, but viewers are constantly extending and redefining it. Far from being simply manipulated, they know they are playing a game, and derive considerable pleasure from crossing the boundaries between fiction and reality. (1987: 204)

In her analysis of the ideological structure of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, Jane Feuer argues that these soaps represent a 'potentially progressive form' (1984: 15), precisely because the serial form and the multiple plot structure do not allow for clear-cut ideological positions and constructions. 'Since no action is irreversible, every ideological position may be countered by its opposite', and thus, these soaps may be read 'either as critical of the dominant ideology of capitalism or as belonging to it, depending upon the position from which the reader comes at it' (1984: 15).

Since representation of ambivalence and contradictions is at the heart of the genre, this continuing ideological uncertainty gives viewers a certain freedom to construct their own meanings. In Ellen Seiter's opinion, it is precisely this ideological uncertainty which marks soap opera as a 'female genre':

The importance of small discontinuous narrative units which are never organized by a single patriarchal discourse or main narrative line, which do not build towards an ending or a closure of meaning, which in their very complexity cannot give a final ideological word on anything, makes soap opera uniquely 'open' to feminist readings. (1981: 43)

However, Feuer recognises that 'openness' of TV texts does not in and of itself represent a salutary [sic] or progressive stance', yet, she claims, 'continuing melodramatic serial seems to offer an especially active role for the spectator' (1984: 15).

As another appeal of soaps for audiences constructed as female, feminist television criticism has identified the disruption of the deep-rooted value structure which is based on the traditional opposition between masculinity and femininity. Geraghty argues that 'the concerns of soaps have traditionally been based on the commonly perceived split between the public and the personal, between work and leisure, reason and emotion, action and contemplation' (1991: 40). These socially constructed dichotomies not only offer a set of

positions but praise what are seen to be the more active models—those of the public sphere—over those of the personal sphere, considered more passive. Feminists have been questioning the naturalness of such dichotomies in different ways, in some cases, bringing the personal into the public sphere—for example with the introduction of child care and sexuality issues into trade union activity; in others, this has been done by celebrating the specificity of women's pleasures and re-evaluating them against male denigration (Geraghty 1991: 40-41).

The personal sphere is the essence of soap storylines and 'the emphasis is on talk not on action, on slow development rather than immediate response, on delayed retribution rather than instant effect' (Geraghty 1991: 41). Moreover, in Geraghty's opinion, soaps acknowledge and value the emotional work which women supposedly 'undertake in the personal sphere' (1991: 42-43). This engagement with the personal is thought to be central to women's involvement with soaps and it is achieved through different strategies: the setting in domestic spaces of most of the scenes, an approach to social issues with an emphasis on their emotional and personal consequences, and the location centre stage of strong female characters.

Commenting on the distinction between public and personal life as one of the main aspects of the genre, Brunson argues that 'the ideological problematic of soap opera' is 'personal life in its everyday realization through the personal relationship' and that 'it is within this realm of the domestic, the personal, the private, that feminine competence is recognised' (1981: 34). She concludes that '[i]t is the culturally constructed skills of femininity—sensitivity, perception, intuition and the necessary privileging of the concerns of personal life—which are both called on and practiced in the genre' (1981: 36). According to Brunson, then, understanding *Crossroads* and the derivation of pleasure from viewing it requires skilled readers and the 'competences necessary for that process are the very ones which are valued in the soaps themselves' (Geraghty 1991: 46). Thus, Brunson does not share the interpretation of soaps' viewers as distracted and unaware. On the contrary, she believes the viewer is called on to make judgments about characters and events. In Geraghty's opinion, this should be the approach employed in soap opera' audience analysis:

‘until we replace the model of the tolerant viewer accepting everything with that of Brunsdon’s competent viewer weighing the emotional dilemmas put before her, we are always going to underestimate the position offered by the female viewer of soap operas’ (1991: 47).

These judgments the viewer is invited to make are influenced by one of the main aspects of soap opera, which has also contributed to marking it as a ‘female’ genre since its very beginning. When television soap operas were initially developed in Great Britain and the United States, in the 1960s and 1970s, television series traditionally had a narrative structure in which ‘the man’s role’ was treated as ‘the active one’ and had the function ‘of forwarding the story, making things happen’ (Mulvey 1975: 12). However, in soap operas, since the dawn of the genre, not only have female characters occupied centre stage but the viewer has always been invited to live the actions through their perspective, thus identifying with their point of view. In Geraghty’s words, this process establishes a ‘shared female viewpoint’ (1991: 49), an identification and almost a sense of solidarity between them and the viewer. In her opinion, ‘this sense of being “down among the women” is crucial to the pleasures of recognition which soaps offer women—a slightly secretive, sometimes unspoken understanding developed through the endless analysis of emotional dilemma’ (1991: 47). At the heart of many soaps, we find relationships between mothers and daughters and female friends, and a significant amount of time is dedicated to showing women talking together. In *Poble Nou*, *El cor de la ciutat*, and *Ventdelplà*, the predominance of women in the narratives is explicit. In fact, all these series begin with a dramatic change in a female character’s life: in *Poble Nou*, Rosa wins the lottery, in *El cor de la ciutat* Clara is released from prison and returns home, and in *Ventdelplà* Teresa goes away from Barcelona to escape from her abusive husband, finding refuge in the town where she was born.

Moreover, as James Curran argues, what is valued by the microcosms created by soap operas is the diversity of its members and ‘a sense of social cohesion and belonging’ (2002: 207) in the community their narratives generate. Curran makes a connection between British public service broadcasting and the community

orientation of its soaps. Likewise, in his comparative study, Hugh O'Donnell points out that most European soap operas promote 'values of solidarity [and] caring for and about others, defending other people's rights, compromises and co-operation' (1999: 222-223). Similarly, Gallego describes the society constructed in Catalan soaps as democratic, integrating, and open (1999: 21).

This is not only true of European soaps, as demonstrated by Purnima Mankekar's ethnographic study of Indian soaps, which, she states, transmit 'explicit social messages' (1999: 303). In addition, with reference to the huge popularity of *telenovelas* in Latin America, Martín-Barbero suggests that one reason for this could be '[their] capacity to make an archaic narrative the repository for propositions to modernize some dimensions of life' (1995: 280). It is interesting to link this 'didactic project assigned to soaps [...] in which productions (often state-controlled), text and reception come together in different ways to present a version of the modern state' (Geraghty 2005: 12) to the role of women as a 'modernizing force' (O'Donnell 2002: 222). From this perspective, we can see, therefore, that the community orientation in soaps is intrinsically linked to the predominance of female roles.

Moreover, soaps typically represent groups who tend to be ignored in other genres, for example, people who feel they belong to ethnic or sexual minorities or age groups who receive little space in other formats, especially the elderly. Thus, soaps play a social role in exploring shifting and marginal identities, privileging 'difference over homogeneity, understanding over rejection' (Hayward 1997: 191) and in promoting 'sympathetic understanding of the others' (O'Donnell 2002: 207). This didactic aspect also reprises an old discussion about whether television functions as an agent for, or as a mirror of, social change. According to Badia and Berrio, television creates a 'projecte nacional de societat'¹⁷ (1997: 235), that is, it aspires to represent a supposedly ideal society instead of being exclusively linked to an epistemology of realism. In scriptwriter Enric Gomà's 'words, 'les

¹⁷ 'National project of society'.

telenovel·les beuen de la realitat però no són reflexes de la realitat'¹⁸ (quoted in Ortega 2002: 331).

Dealing with this didactic quality in *EastEnders* leads Buckingham to define this soap as a 'teacherly text' (1987: 102), and, with respect to the programme's representation of ethnicity, he comments that 'the crucial question is not whether *EastEnders*'s black characters are "realistic", but how the serial invites its viewers to make sense of questions of ethnicity' (1987: 102). When I mentioned these reflections on the soap opera genre to Benet i Jornet in the interview, he told me that: 'Som didàctics. Declaradament didàctics, en les sèries'.¹⁹

In a similar vein, in the interview I conducted with him on 18 May 2010, Esteve Rovira²⁰ also commented that 'sens dubte que la nostra feina també és educar socialment i explorar temes'.²¹ This didacticism is also acknowledged by scriptwriters Enric Gomà and Jordi Galcerán who avow that, in some cases, more time is spent discussing the 'moral' than the storyline. They affirm that, although they do not believe soap operas are able to influence people's lives, they can serve to 'crear estats d'opinió'²² (quoted in Ortega 2002: 333). Delving into the didactic aspect of soap operas, I would argue that this is particularly evident in the way Catalan soaps treat the issue of gender violence, which is given a significant importance in all serials.

In *Poblenou*, for example, this issue is dealt with through two characters, Rosa and Charo. Both women are working-class, although they belong to different age groups: Rosa is in her forties whereas Charo is in her twenties. Both Rosa and Charo are subjected to sexual violence by their husbands, and thus the storylines focus their attention on domestic violence. The objectification of women and an interpretation of marriage as an 'ownership' certificate of the female

¹⁸ 'Soap operas draw on reality but they don't reflect it'.

¹⁹ 'We are didactic. Explicitly didactic, in the series'.

²⁰ Esteve Rovira is a Catalan cinema and television director. He directed serials such as *El cor de la ciutat* and *La Riera*.

²¹ 'There is no doubt that our job is to educate socially and explore topics'.

²² 'Influence public opinion'.

body is harshly criticised by the series. This possessive conceptualisation of marriage is represented by Antonio's words in the rape scene: 'Tinc dret a tocar-te. Sí, tens la culpa d'estar jo calent [...] Sóc el teu home i tinc unes necessitats [...] Ets meva, ets meva, ets meva'.²³ Moreover, through the character of Charo, the series deals with the danger of self-hatred and the sense of guilt that some victims feel after being abused: 'Som casats, de moment. Encara és el meu marit, deu tenir els seus drets',²⁴ she says to her employer and friend Helena, whose indignant rejoinder expresses the moral of the series:

Els seus drets? Quins drets? Els drets de fer-te servir com i quan vulgui? Com una baieta, com un fregall de cuina? Estàs equivocada, eh? Charo, tu ets una persona, com ell, igual que ell. Ni dintre ni fora del matrimoni cap home té dret a violentar el cos d'una dona sense el seu consentiment. Ho entens això? [...] Això que el teu home t'ha fet per la força bruta és un delictes.²⁵

The issue of institutionalised sexism is also dealt with when Charo decides to report the crime. She has to face the prejudices of the policemen in charge of the case, something which, she says on one occasion, has even managed to make her feel guilty about what happened. When I drew this storyline to Benet i Jornet's attention, he also recalled the character of Teresa in *Ventdelplà*. As I have mentioned earlier, the series begins with this female character escaping from her abusive husband, Damià. What is important in this storyline, in Benet i Jornet's opinion, is that both Teresa and Damià belong to the upper-middle class, since she is a doctor and he is a lawyer. According to Benet i Jornet, this kind of storyline has always

²³ 'I have the right to touch you. It's your fault if I am aroused [...] I am your husband and I have my needs... You are mine, you are mine, you are mine'.

²⁴ 'We are still married at the moment. He is still my husband, I guess he has his rights'.

²⁵ 'His rights? What rights? The rights to use you however and whenever he wants? As a floor cloth, as a kitchen scourer? You are wrong, eh? Charo, you are a person, like him, equal to him. Whether inside or outside a marriage no man has a right to rape the body of a woman, without her consent. Do you understand that? What your husband forced you to do is a crime'.

been linked exclusively to working class people, thus, hiding the fact that gender violence occurs irrespective of social class.

The same consideration can be made with respect to gender discrimination, especially within marriage. In the series *Poblenou*, two marriages are characterised by strict division of gender roles, due to the chauvinist attitude of the two men: on the one hand, Antonio, Rosa's husband, belongs to the working class, whereas, on the other, Eudald belongs to the upper-middle class. This conception of relationship and marriage is epitomised by Antonio's slur, according to which 'un home ha de saber portar els pantalons, si no, no es pot mantenir el matrimoni'.²⁶ While Rosa finally decides to separate from her husband, Eudald's wife Cristina prefers to maintain the appearance of a perfect marriage to defend the social prestige of her family, even at the cost of her own happiness and the possibility of a loving relationship:

Jo no dic que una dona no hagi de treballar, però hi ha moments que si ella no hi és, malament rai. Ara que mira de què m'ha servit a mi pensar d'aquesta manera. Al meu home gairebé no li veig el pèl. Si jo i l'Eudald estem junts és ben bé perquè a aquestes edats i en la nostra situació és més còmode aguantar i callar.²⁷

Therefore, she represents the risk of an internalisation by women of patriarchal values through socialisation. Indeed, some female characters of her generation, though not all, are shown as being torn between contradictory feelings. Their personal and emotional dissatisfaction clashes with what they have been taught all their lives

²⁶ 'A man has to know how to be the one who wears the trousers, otherwise the marriage falls apart'.

²⁷ 'I am not saying that a woman shouldn't work, but there are moments when, if she isn't there, that's no good. Now, look what I gained from thinking like this. I almost never see my husband. If Eudald and I are still together, it's just because at our age and in our situation it is more convenient to put up and shut up'.

about how they should behave and the priorities they should have—they have been educated ‘a l’antiga’²⁸ as Rosa frequently says. In the next paragraphs, I am going to examine Rosa’s storyline. I have chosen to focus on this character because the relatively limited number of episodes allows me to extrapolate a definite pattern of representation and to identify a clear evolution of the character. Rosa is depicted as a working-class, uneducated housewife. The audience is told nothing about her hobbies or friends and she is initially only shown within the domestic sphere, often doing housework such as cooking, cleaning, and mending socks. Thus, the immediate impression is that Rosa’s life evolves entirely around her family and her roles of wife and mother. She has three children: Ferran, who is twenty-one years old; Anna, who is seventeen; and Martí, who is fourteen. In the first episode, Rosa admits to her daughter that she feels she is getting old and that she is afraid of thinking about what her life is going to be like when her three children will have grown up:

Rosa: El Ferran ja és gran i tu també. I el Martí ho serà dintre de quatre dies. Avui m’he mirat al mirall i m’he adonat que m’estic fent vella.

Anna: Hauries de treballar. Et distrauries.

Rosa: De què vols que treballi!? Si, a part de cuinar, no sé fer res. Vaig ser l’última estúpida dels temps que les dones deixaven de treballar quan es casaven.²⁹

The archetype represented by Rosa is contrasted throughout the series with that embodied by the character of Helena. A teacher in secondary school, Helena is represented very often doing activities concerned with her job, such as marking exams or writing a review of

²⁸ ‘In an old-fashioned way’.

²⁹ ‘**Rosa:** Ferran is already a grown-up and you are as well. And Martí will be very soon. Today I’ve looked myself in the mirror and realised that I’m getting old.

Anna: You should work. It would distract you.

Rosa: How can I work!? I can’t do anything but cooking. I’m among the last of that generation that stupidly thought that when women got married they had to give up working.’

an anthology of nineteenth century poets. Her professional career is very important to her and she is dedicated to it, so much so that at the end of the series she is promoted to head of school. She is the single mother of a seventeen year old girl, Júlia, and her interpretation of sexuality and relationships clashes pointedly with Rosa's: 'Sóc una persona lliure, sense problemes. Vaig amb un home que m'agrada i quan l'experiència s'ha acabat, adéu-siau, i va ser bonic mentre va durar',³⁰ she once tells her lover, Enric. Helena's decision to raise Júlia by herself also contrasts with Rosa's apparently traditional family. 'No en necessites tu, de pare',³¹ she tells her daughter.³² Helena's belief that what is generally called a 'traditional' family is not necessarily the best option for raising a child is restated in a dialogue with Enric: 'La figura del pare no és necessària',³³ she tells him. Her conviction clashes with Rosa's system of values which, at the beginning of the series, prompts her to make whatever sacrifice is needed in order to keep her family together. When she finds out that her husband had an affair with another woman, she decides not to divorce on account of what she interprets as the wellbeing of her children: 'Per a ells continuaré fent el que feia fins ara: cuinaré, netejaré la roba... Tu no t'ho mereixes, però ells s'ho mereixen tot',³⁴ she tells her unfaithful husband.

However, during the course of the series, Rosa is forced to go through some experiences which lead her to reconsider aspects of her life she had always thought to be unquestionable. First of all, the routine of Rosa's life is broken when she finds out that she has won the lottery—enough money to move to a new flat and convert the shop which belongs to Antonio's aunt Victòria into a supermarket.

³⁰ 'I'm a free person, with no problem. I go with a man who I like and when the experience is over, good-bye and it was nice while it lasted'.

³¹ 'You don't need a father'.

³² In fact, after a few episodes, we realise that Helena is not Júlia's biological mother but her aunt. We find out that Helena's sister died after being abandoned by Júlia's father and, since then, Helena has raised Júlia as her daughter without any help.

³³ 'The father figure is not necessary'.

³⁴ 'For them, I will keep doing what I have been doing so far: cooking, washing clothes... You don't deserve it, but they deserve it all'.

However, all these choices are made by her husband, who excludes Rosa from any decision. Antonio's patronising attitude is clearly visible in one scene in which he refuses to show his wife the estimate for the shop because he is convinced that she would not understand it. Later, Victòria finds out that Antonio is trying to open the supermarket only under his name, thus excluding his wife from the ownership of the business. This is the first time we see Rosa reacting to her husband's deceptions: 'Si pel llit, per la cuina i per pujar-te els fills serveixo, també serviré per ser la propietària d'aquest supermercat. O serveixo per tot o no serveixo per res',³⁵ she warns him.

Rosa's attitude changes radically once she becomes the co-owner of a catering business with her friend Bernat. When Antonio, who disapproves of his wife working alongside another man, demands to know with whom she spends her time when she is not at home, she replies: 'Jo vaig amb qui vull, em veig amb qui vull i tu no n'has de fer res'.³⁶ She undergoes a significant change, also because of some other events which prompt her to question her system of values: she finds out that her brother has a relationship with another man and that her teenage daughter is pregnant. This change of behaviour is also reflected by a change of image: with Helena's help, she starts to take care of her physical appearance, she dyes her hair, she changes the way she dresses, so much so that she begins to wear trousers, something that she never does in the first part of the series. Finally, Rosa decides to separate from her spouse for good, refusing the patriarchal model of family imposed by her husband:

³⁵ 'If I am good for sex, cooking, and raising your children, I will also be good as the owner of this supermarket. I am either good for everything or I am good for nothing'.

³⁶ 'I go with who I want, I see who I want, and it is none of your business'.

Tu no tens ni idea del que sento. Mai no l'has tingut. I mai no t'has preocupat de saber-ho. Això és el que més em dol. Però s'ha acabat, Antonio, aquesta vegada s'ha acabat de debó.³⁷

At the end of the soap, the victimised attitude has gone together with the resignation with which she had always uncritically accepted everything that would happen in her life: Rosa is a confident woman, willing to begin a new life in her forties. It is precisely in the character of Rosa and her journey towards freedom and awareness that we find the main moral of the soap. At the beginning of the series, Rosa is a metaphor for the average working class woman of the *postguerra*, a woman who has always done what she has been told to do. She married Antonio when she was still very young, and when he was the only lover she had ever had, and then she had three children. During the course of the soap, through a series of events, she changes and becomes aware of her value as a person and as a woman.

The narrative structure of contrasting two opposite female archetypes is also found in the serial which is being broadcast at the moment of writing, *La Riera*, through the representation of Mercè and Nuria. Like Helena and Rosa, they also belong to the same generation—Mercè is sixty-two and Nuria is fifty-eight—but they are depicted so to represent two polarised interpretations of womanhood. Mercè is an independent woman, respected and valued in her private and family life as well as in her professional life by the employees in her restaurant. On the other hand, Nuria is a housewife and it is her husband Albert who is responsible not only for the financial support of the family but also for managing the domestic economy. Nuria is depicted as a naïve woman who has never lived outside her little town and has a strong belief system which is strictly built around her religious faith—she and her husband are, indeed, practicing Catholics. Both Mercè and Nuria belong to the upper-middle class, thus their different interpretation of their roles as wives and their different conceptualisation of womanhood are not linked to a diverse social and

³⁷ 'You have no idea about how I feel. You never had. And you never cared. This is what hurts me the most. But it's over, Antonio, this time it's over for good'.

economic status. It is interesting to note that, from *Poblenou* to *La Riera*, the depiction of these two polarised archetypes has been shifted from women in their forties to women in their late fifties and early sixties.

Indeed, as far as younger female characters go, *La Riera* tends to represent them as professionals—lawyers, business women, journalists, and so forth—and none of them is depicted as having issues about balancing work with their home lives, and in particular with their role as mothers. I argue that this issue—which was so crucial in *Poblenou*, especially as far as the character of Rosa is concerned when she decides to open a catering business and become economically independent from her husband—has been deliberately disregarded in *La Riera* in order to represent a generation of women in their thirties and forties who do not interpret their professional ambitions as being at odds with their idea of femininity and motherhood. However, there are two considerations that need to be made. First of all, these female characters are depicted as wealthy and their economically privileged situation allows them, for example, to pay for child care—something that it is not within everyone's reach. Secondly, by making this choice, the series avoids confronting issues such as the job discrimination and bullying often suffered by women after their maternal leave. I maintain that the representation of this set of characters exemplifies the interpretation of television's role as a projector of an ideal society elaborated by Badia and Berrio, which I have discussed above.

It is also worthwhile noticing that, while I have argued that Catalan soaps often link professional self-development and economic independence to women's awareness of their gender identities, this is not translated into a devaluation of the experience of maternity. As Rosa says, 'pujar tres criatures ensenya més del que molts es pensen';³⁸ female teenage characters in Catalan soaps often recognise this role. In this sense, a significant meaning is acquired by the dedication which Rosa's daughter's, Anna, writes to her mother when she gives her a copy of her first published novel: 'A la meva mare que

³⁸ 'Raising three children teaches you more than many people think'.

em va ensenyar a caminar, a parlar i a estimar'.³⁹ Indeed, the relationships created by different generations of women which allow them to establish a network of mutual help and comfort plays a crucial role in all Catalan soaps: from Victòria, Rosa, and Anna in *Poblenou* to Mercè, Sònia, and Ariadna in *La Riera*, a genealogy of female experiences is created. On the other hand, this genealogy is rarely constructed for men. The contrary is true, since very often fathers and sons are deliberately employed to depict polarised interpretations of manhood. This narrative structure is particularly clear as far as the characters of Eudald and his son Jaume in *Poblenou* are concerned. I have already examined how Eudald represents a conceptualisation of marriage based on strict binary gender roles. He is also represented as an authoritarian father, not willing to establish a relationship based on dialogue and trust with his son. However, in the series, the way men relate to their role as father changes significantly between different generations. Since the beginning, Jaume wants to be involved in the rearing of his child and feels very responsible for his education, even if, when Anna tells him she is pregnant, they are temporarily separated. While he is in New York, Jaume sends the following fax to Anna:

Jo hi penso molt, potser més del que em pertoca. Tenir un fill teu serà la cosa més bonica que m'haurà passat a la vida. Tot l'amor que he sentit per tu el dipositaré en ell. Vull ser responsable d'aquest fill, ja ho saps. No penso quedar-me per sempre a Nova York, però si no hi hagués cap més raó, educar i veure com creix la criatura que ha de néixer seria suficient per tornar a Barcelona.⁴⁰

³⁹ 'To my mum, who taught me how to walk, talk, and love'.

⁴⁰ 'I think about it a lot, maybe more than I should. Having a child with you will be the best thing that has happened in my life. All the love I felt for you I will give it to him. I want to be responsible for this child, you know that. I won't stay here in New York forever, but if there wasn't any another reason, educating and seeing our child growing up would be enough to come back to Barcelona'.

Anna's storyline also allows me to reflect on another issue often dealt with in Catalan soaps, that is to say unexpected pregnancy. In *Poblenou*, this topic is represented through three characters: Helena, Anna, and Emilia. The latter is a poor, uneducated woman in her forties whose purpose in the soap is to criticise the illegality of abortion during Franco's dictatorship. Indeed, Emilia conceived a child when she was very young with a man who abandoned her. The series stresses the difficulties this woman had to face in order to raise a child alone in a time when being a single mother was socially condemned. Therefore, unlike Helena and Anna, as we are going to see, Emilia did not choose to have the child, but her maternity was imposed on her by the social and juridical contexts. It is made clear to the audience, in fact, that Emilia did not want a child and that, if she had been given the choice, she would have had an abortion. On the contrary, Helena and Anna take the decision of seeing their pregnancies through.

Although these two female characters belong to different generations, their storylines follow parallel paths: they both find out that they are pregnant during a moment of crisis in the relationship. Therefore, they are faced with the prospect of raising their child without a steady partner. The series unequivocally represents the choice about whether or not to have an abortion as always down to women since, in both cases, they unilaterally decide without consulting their partners. This conviction is expressed by Helena: 'Serà el meu fill, i el del Daniel, ja ho veuré',⁴¹ she says when she takes the decision to keep the baby. Anna's situation is complicated by her young age, her lack of economic independence, and the feeling of not being ready for such a great responsibility, as she confesses to aunt Victòria: 'Jo no sé si estic preparada per tenir un fill [...] Em sento molt immadura per ser mare. I vull fer tantíssimes coses, només tinc divuit anys, tieta!'.⁴² However, after reflecting upon the

⁴¹ 'He is going to be my baby. Whether he is going to be Daniel's as well, we'll see'.

⁴² 'I don't know if I am ready to have a baby. I feel very immature to be a mother. And I want to do so many things, I am only eighteen years old, aunty!'.

consequences, Anna also decides to keep her baby. Therefore, a generally negative attitude can be perceived towards abortion since under all circumstances, when confronting the possibility of interrupting their pregnancies, women always choose to keep the baby. This decision is always rewarded with solving the problems in their relationships and with an improvement in their economic condition. However, this attitude has changed throughout the years and in *Ventdelplà* we can find the storyline of Isona, a university student who finds out she is pregnant and decides to have an abortion. In one scene, the girl overhears a conversation between two women, Marcela and Berta. The latter is pregnant and Marcela asks her if she is ready to change nappies and wake up in the middle of the night to feed the baby. After replying that she does not mind, Berta nonetheless adds: 'Els fills els tens quan els desitjes si no...tot se't fa una muntanya'.⁴³ Isona realises that she is not ready to have a child and communicates her decision to her partner, Enric, who, on the other hand, is enthusiastic about becoming a father. Enric tells her that she cannot take this decision by herself, but Isona vehemently replies: 'No perdona, és el meu cos i la decisió és només meva'.⁴⁴ Despite her partner's opposition, Isona decides to see it through and have an abortion. Although *Ventdelplà* also presents Enric's point of view, it is clear that the series defends the right of a woman ultimately to decide with or without her partner's consent.

Finally, the representation of illnesses and disability can also be seen from a didactic perspective. An illness which has been included in several Catalan soaps is cancer, especially breast cancer, which has given the writers the chance to uncover the relationship which, sometimes, can be detected between illness and gender. Both Helena in *Poblenou* and Clara in *El cor de la ciutat*, for example, are diagnosed with the disease, but these two storylines are not curtailed after the mastectomy they undergo. Both series portray the struggles that the two female characters face in order to accept their bodies,

⁴³ 'You should have children only when you want them, otherwise...you can't bear the responsibility'.

⁴⁴ 'No, I am sorry, this is my body and it is only up to me to take this decision'.

which have undergone such a dramatic change, and to be physically intimate with others, especially their partners. A similar issue is represented through a female character in *Ventdeplà*, Mònica. The young woman is involved in a car accident and loses the use of her legs and the serial shows how her disability affects her love for and sexual relationship with her boyfriend Rafa. However, in this storyline, the series also examines Rafa's insecurities and fears. The first time they try to have sex after the accident, Rafa is too worried about what Mònica might or might not feel and cannot get an erection, making him feel inadequate. It takes them some time to feel sexually comfortable with one another. In the love scene in which they finally do, Mònica's wheelchair is left in the background, out of focus, as an element which does not disrupt the lovers' life anymore.

Another storyline included in *Ventdelplà* which deals with the relation between illness and sexuality is narrated through the character of Cristina, a young woman who finds out she is HIV positive. The series depicts the difficulties her HIV status supposes for her sex life. She initially believes that her boyfriend Martí, who is not positive, is staying with her after finding out only out of compassion: 'No suport la teva pietat. No vull la teva llàstima',⁴⁵ she tells him and she gives him the chance to end the relationship. Martí refuses to do so but soon understands that he cannot deal with the situation: he is terrified of becoming infected and he constantly rejects Cristina's displays of affection. Realising Martí's fears, Cristina decides to break up with him. However, in subsequent storylines involving her character, we see how the girl is able to overcome the situation and, in the end, she finds a partner, Enric, who is not scared of her HIV status.

Benet i Jornet concluded his argument about the didactic aspirations of Catalan soaps by stating that:

[N]ormalment fas més històries sentimentals, de vegades dramàtiques, de vegades d'intriga, o el que sigui, però també procurem posar problemes reals, explicant-los a la gent i explicant, si tenen solució, la manera de

⁴⁵ 'I can't stand your pity. I don't want your pity'.

solucionar-los, i si no en tenen, què s'hauria de fer per...bé, ja m'entens.⁴⁶

Similarly, talking about the success of Catalan soaps in terms of audience ratings, the same Benet i Jornet had already emphasised the role of the series in transmitting social values in an interview published by *El País* on 25 April 1998:

No conectamos con la sociedad por los temas que tratamos, sino que lo que influye al público es lo que subyace tras la trama. Y debajo de las historias hay información: sobre un modelo de vida de tolerancia, de respeto y de entendimiento del mundo que nos rodea. Eso es lo que llega.⁴⁷

Therefore, Catalan soaps shows an aspiration to educate the public about social issues. For instance, great effort is dedicated to representing cases of domestic violence, especially in the first soap *Poblenou* in 1994, a moment when the issue of violence against women within the domestic realm was not given significant attention by the political establishment. In this sense, I would go so far as to argue that media, although evidently lacking any performative function, can sometimes substitute for the political arena in creating debates and influencing public opinion around social issues. As Pilar Aguilar Carrasco argues in her essay about the representations of sexual violence in Spanish films, 'la ficción audiovisual es una poderosa maquinaria que crea puntos de vista ideológicos y/o emotivos, permisividad o censura, lazos proyectivos de empatía o de

⁴⁶ 'We usually create romantic, or tragic, or thriller-like stories, it varies. But we also try to deal with real problems, explain them to people, and, by doing that, suggest solutions, if there are any, otherwise we explain what should be done in order to...well, you know what I mean'.

⁴⁷ 'We don't connect with society because of the stories we tell. What influences the audience is what there is underneath the storyline. And underneath the stories, there is information: about a social model of acceptance, respect, and understanding of the world that surrounds us. This is what gets to the audience'.

http://elpais.com/diario/1998/04/25/catalunya/893466454_850215.html.

rechazo, etc. Estamos, pues, ante un potente artefacto al que hay que prestar atención si creemos que otro mundo es posible y queremos trabajar por él⁴⁸ (2010: 144).

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⁴⁸ 'Audiovisual fiction is a powerful machinery which creates ideological and/or emotional points of view, permissiveness or censorship, empathy or rejection, and so forth. We are, then, in front of a powerful artifact, to which we should pay attention, if we believe that another world is possible and we want to work to create it'.

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