

# 1 Quality TV? The *Periodistas* Notebook

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## TV

I can still not be sure what I took from the whole flow. I believe I registered some incidents as happening in the wrong film, and some characters in the commercials as involved in the film episodes, in what came to seem – for all the occasional bizarre disparities – a single irresponsible flow of images and feelings.

(Williams 1974b: 91–2; cited in Corner 1999: 62)

Like Raymond Williams, recently arrived in Miami and dazzled by the unaccustomed spectacle of US television, the literary or film scholar might be forgiven for disorientation when venturing into TV studies. Stephen Heath has also decried the ‘extension, availability, [and] proximity’ of television, ‘all of which is played out on its screen from show to show in the endless flow’ (Heath 1990: 297; quoted in Corner 1999: 69). Whereas a novel or a film is clearly delimited in length, available only from approved agents, and formally separate from the times and spaces of everyday life, the twenty-four hour, domesticated rhythm of television is inseparable from the modern experience it has both reflected and created.

But if television is ubiquitous, it need not be the ‘bad machine’, endless and irresponsible. Nor do warnings of the globalization of electronic media preclude the emergence of new national programming. In this first chapter, then, I will argue against the sometimes apocalyptic tendencies of some media theory (the philosophical pessimism of ‘flow’) and for a newly differentiated account of genre,

nationality and industrial practice in relation to programme content. As we shall see, some programming sets itself apart from the everyday, and some production companies (even when controlled by multinational conglomerates and operating under the fiercest commercial competition) aim for quality local programming that will attract a select but profitable demographic.

In his excellent synoptic study *Critical Ideas in Television Studies* John Corner (1999) has sought to mediate between social science and the humanities' approaches typified by Williams and Heath above. The latter, he believes, often lack both 'specific analysis of formal structures' and 'detailed engagement with broadcasting history' (69). Corner argues that television must be seen in an institutional context, as an 'ecology' (12) distinct from other mass media such as newspapers (15), not least for the way in which it consistently blurs the boundaries between the public and private spheres. Combining sociologists' concern for 'objectifiable aspects [such as] organization and functioning' with the humanist critics' openness to 'aesthetics, discourse, and value' (10), Corner treats the distinct, but linked, fields of production and reception, pleasure and knowledge, narrative and flow. We can take these fundamental categories in turn.

Production, argues Corner, is relatively neglected in an empirical context, given the difficulty of academic access to a sometimes suspicious media industry (70). Where policy documentation is available (likewise interviews with participants), it raises questions of evidential validity. As a 'moment of multiple intentions' (70), production takes on different usages in TV theory, relating diversely to historical contexts, institutional settings, production mentalities and production practices (71). Questions of both the 'authorial scope' of producers and the 'autonomy', or even 'autism', of institutions (74) are raised most acutely by two forms of programming: news and drama. In both areas empirical enquiry has revealed surprising 'occupational complexity and contingency' and 'complexity of television "authorship"' (76–7), even when select 'quality' programming is produced by a company with distinctive audience demographics, corporate history and socio-aesthetic profile (78).

The sociologically tinged concept of production is, however, inseparable from the interest in reception that was spearheaded by the humanities, and most particularly by cultural studies (80). For reception is also multiple and contingent, occurring at the intersection of social and psychological needs and having unintended consequences (82). And while some scholars see reception as reproducing 'structured social inequalit[ies]' (84), others, of the 'uses and gratifications' school (85), stress not the pernicious effects of the

medium on public communication but rather the 'cultural competence' of the viewer, most especially of drama (86). More particularly, recent changes in 'multiple consumption opportunities' have seen a change in programme address: from the 'ideologies of the home to . . . individualized commodity taste' (90).

The newer focus on gratification and taste has arisen out of attempts to study the elusive topic of television pleasure, once more an emphasis of cultural studies. If television, unlike cinema, is universally required to provide both public information and entertainment, then critics read the pleasure it provides either negatively, as a form of 'cultural debasement' (93), or positively, as a challenge to elite, high culture (94). TV pleasures are visual, parasocial or dramatic. They may be based on new knowledge, comedy or fantasy, or (alternatively) on the familiar notions of distraction, diversion and routine (99). The debate around 'quality' to which I return later is also riven by 'a tension between publicly protected cultural values and the popular pleasures of cultural markets' (107).

If pleasure is critically debated, knowledge is no less problematic. Corner rehearses 'three types of badness' often attributed to television: mis-selection (in which the TV 'gatekeeper' rules out inadmissible content); misrepresentation (in which the imagistic brevity and narrativization of TV form traduce the complexity of the real); and mis-knowing (in which the perceptual or cognitive aspects of the knowledge process itself are debased) (109–10). The move from print to electronic media is thus seen as a decline: from ideas to feeling, appearance and mood; or from 'Is it true? Is it false?' to 'How does it look? How does it feel?' (113). Conversely, commentators have seen the extension of public knowledge through broadcasting as the 'democratization of everyday life' and the creation of a 'mediated democratic polity' (114) impossible through print.

Crucial to Corner here is the question of drama. The emotional engagement generated by fiction, and most particularly by workplace dramas, 'informs social understanding' in such areas as occupation, family, health and money (115). Narrative, then (even in the infinite form of soap opera), can perhaps be read as a final antidote to flow theory. For although the incursion of narrative into TV journalism (where segments have long been known as 'stories') has been read as an 'erosion' (47) of the informational and expository values of the medium, both spoken and enacted narrative constitute a 'significant dimension of modern public knowledge' (59). The depth of virtual relationship enjoyed by viewers with the characters of series drama ('the sense of coexistence between real and fictive worlds' (59)) thus forms a distinctive socio-aesthetic profile that is

worthy of analysis, and is not to be dismissed as the narcotic alienation of a 'dramatized society' (Corner 1999: 48, citing Williams 1974a).

## Quality TV

Quality makes money.

(Grant Tinker, President MTM;  
cited Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi 1984: 26)

Corner highlights the conflict in debates on quality between institutions and aesthetics. On the one hand, "quality" signals a concern with defining more clearly what . . . can be assessed as a good product and thereby used as a marker in both public and corporate audits of the industry' (106). This objectifiable dimension, derived from management theory and relating to such areas as corporate restructuring and industrial standards, slips, on the other hand, into more subjective notions: 'questions of generic preference, class, gender and age-related variations in cultural taste, and different ways of relating to the popular' (106). As so often, it is in drama and entertainment that such issues are raised most acutely.

Other scholars further complexify this schema. Geoff Mulgan (1990) cites no fewer than seven types of quality, of which only the first two are dealt with by Corner: producer quality and professionalism (8), consumer quality and the market (10), quality and the medium: television's aesthetic (15), television as ritual and communion (19), television and the person (21), the televisual ecology (24) and, finally, quality as diversity (26). Most commentators, however, line up on one side of the divide between production and reception. John Thornton Caldwell (1994) sees the producers' need for what he variably calls 'loss leader', 'event status' and 'special' programming (162–3), which undercuts three cherished beliefs of media theorists: namely, the supposed populism, mundaneness and boundlessness of televisual flow (163). On the contrary, writes Caldwell, 'loss-leader events programmes make every effort to underscore and illuminate their textual borders,' making the 'bounds of distinction . . . a crucial part of the genre' (163). Kim Christian Schröder (1992), on the other hand, attempts to pin down the 'phantom' of cultural quality by offering a 'reception perspective on cultural value' (199). Following Bourdieu's lead on the role of distinction in conferring 'aesthetic status on objects that are banal or even "common"' (199),

Schröder rejects the elitism and paternalism implicit in both British and American television culture (200), arguing that ‘quality’ can only exist as ‘quality for someone’ (211). He further proposes that for certain audiences popular series drama does indeed trigger the ethical and aesthetic values traditionally attributed to art, while engaging a third dimension: an ‘ecstatic’ realm of release and loss of control (213).

Schröder’s is a position piece which does not engage closely with particular programmes, aiming rather to ‘open a discussion’ on populism and diversity (215). But he does challenge the specific corporate study responsible for introducing the quality debate into academic TV studies: *MTM: ‘Quality Television’*, by Feuer, Kerr and Vahimagi (1984). ‘This new addition to critical discussion is not occasioned by a general re-evaluation of the products of the cultural industry,’ writes Schröder, ‘but by a handful of outstanding programmes (notably *Hill Street Blues*) from one unique production company (MTM) which function almost as the exception that proves the rule of commercial American television. By labelling MTM programmes “at once artistic and industrial” . . . the analysis clearly presupposes a frame of understanding in which the artistic is almost by nature at odds with the industrial’ (201).

If we turn to Feuer et al.’s study, however, we discover that this is by no means the case, for these authors consistently relate institution and aesthetics, industry and art. Thus the ‘MTM style’ is inseparable from factors that are both material and formal: shooting on film rather than video tape, employing actors schooled in new improvisational techniques, offering creative staff an unusual amount of freedom (32). A specialist ‘indie prod’, MTM was both exceptional (in fulfilling the distinctive criteria for televisual ‘authorship’) and typical (in being subject to the same commercial laws of ratings and cancellation as the rest of the industry) (33). In spite or because of these commercial constraints (which fostered a demand for both repetition of the old and innovation of the new), MTM marked off the boundaries between it and the mainstream producers in both content and form: highlighting sensitive topical issues (140), blurring the genres of comedy and drama (149), and changing the look and sound of prime time with hand-held camera and overlapping sound (148). *Hill Street Blues*, MTM’s most celebrated workplace drama, thus emerged out of ‘a complex intersection of forces in late 1970s American television [including] NBC’s short lived but decisive strategy to sidestep Nielsen aggregates [i.e. brute numbers of viewers] by buying “high quality” consumers via “quality” programmes’ (150).

MTM's industrial context is thus as complex and overdetermined as the artistic texture of its programming with its dense construction, dexterous orchestration of tone, panoramic points of view, and intricate, yet integrated, story lines (151). *Hill Street* was as difficult to police for the jittery network, fearful of offending sponsors, as it was for media academics, anxious to pin down its ambiguous liberal politics in a time of reaction. What seems clear, however, is that the series offered select viewers new and challenging forms of pleasure and knowledge, and that the corporate study of MTM gives the lie to media academics who view 'quality' as the cynical underscoring of phantom bounds of distinction.

## Spanish TV

Except for the occasional strip show or pornographic film, the programming of all [Spanish] channels is very similar to American broadcast television (not to mention the dominance of U.S. products as a percentage of all telefilms, series, and feature films broadcast). . . . The quality varies as much as in any broadcast system, and like most national media industries everywhere, the various Spanish TV channels repulse and attract on a pretty even score across their audiences.

(Maxwell 1995: p. xxiv)

There would appear to be few territories less promising for quality television, however defined, and more hospitable to the philosophical pessimism of 'flow' than Spain. Anecdotally, literate Spaniards dismiss their television system as the 'teletonta' or 'telebasura'. Domestic and foreign journalists reconfirm the stereotype, citing the 'incessant controversy' around the corruption and bias of state television (*El País* 1999) and the crass appeal to sex in the ratings war unleashed by commercial networks such as Telecinco and Antena 3 (Hooper 1995: 317). One Spanish academic stresses the defencelessness of Spain in the global marketplace, lacking as it does a 'national champion to defend [its] colours' (Bustamante 1995: 361); one Briton laments the lack of 'an effective method of regulating programme output [and of] redefin[ing] the notion of public service in relation to the more complex multi-channel and multi-media situation' (Jordan 1995: 368).

The most distinguished scholar of Spanish television, Richard Maxwell (1995), offers a near-apocalyptic institutional history. Maxwell stresses the suddenness of change in Spain: 'In a little more than fifteen years, Spanish television made the transition from

absolute state control to a regulated competitive system of national and regional networks of mixed private and public ownership' (p. xxiv).<sup>1</sup> Maxwell's narrative is one of relentless decline: from 'the death of the Dictator and the twilight of national mass media' (3), through the 'crisis' associated with the Rightist UCD (40), to the 'diminishing returns' of the Socialists' modernizing corporatism (72). He concludes: 'No longer fit for a nation, except on paper, national mass media have been absorbed into processes of privatization of communication around the world, and Spain has just been one more stomping ground of this global juggernaut' (153–4).

Less dramatically, Maxwell analyses here (1995) and later (1997) the legislation specific to Spain which apparently contributed to such general effects: the Statute of [State] Radio and Television of 1980, which redefined the role of RTVE; the Third Channel Law of 1984, which regulated regional broadcasting; and the Private TV Law of 1988, which gave birth to Antena 3, Telecinco and Canal Plus (Maxwell 1997: 261–2). Linking this local legislation to the global juggernaut are Maxwell's three 'salient issues': 'privatization, globalization (or transnationalization), and regionalization (or decentralization)' (1995: p. xxv). The Spanish media experience is 'illuminating', writes Maxwell, 'because of the clearly defined bonds and collisions among regional, national, and transnational media spaces' (p. xxv).

Maxwell is not concerned with programme content; and it comes as some surprise to read in a footnote that he takes pleasure in Spanish television: 'The absence of hierarchical judgments or elitist frameworks [in this study] to inform readers of Spanish media talents is intentional. That I like Spanish TV is irrelevant. Its worth is a question of taste, tradition, closed markets, and cultural translation' (1995: 156, n. 9). What is curious here is how US media theorists are so fascinated by globalization that they fail to engage with the distinctively national content of programming.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as we shall see, Spain may even speak back to US producers, modulating, however slightly, the route of the juggernaut through transnational space. Such subjective matters as 'questions of taste and tradition' (of reception and pleasure) clearly merit equal attention to that accorded objectively verifiable standards of production and knowledge. Certainly Spanish programmes deserve academic consideration comparable to that granted their equivalents in the UK and USA. Developments since Maxwell's pioneering studies suggest that, far from being dominated by North American programming, domestic production of comedy and drama has proved crucial to the survival of the multinationals in Spain; and a recent 'territory

guide' in one of the media trade journals also gives a more nuanced perspective than the global view of academic theory.

*Television Business International* devoted a special issue to 'Spanish TV's New Challenges' in June 1997. On the eve of the launch of two competing digital platforms, *TBI* asks whether the heavily indebted broadcast sector is ready for yet more channels, and when the new Partido Popular government will implement the EE directive's quotas on independent production (17). The state RTVE remains 'the sick man of Spanish TV' (18), with audience share falling from 43 per cent in 1991 to 26.9 per cent in 1996 (19), while free-to-air 'private net[work]s Antena 3 and Telecinco are neck-and-neck in audience share' (20). Pay TV Canal Plus is also 'one of the success stories of the 1990s' (24), in spite of tax increases imposed by a new government on a company closely linked with the previous Socialist regime (25). Likewise, the 'local heroes' serving six independent regions are 'living through good times', with audience share growing in prime time to 19 per cent, the highest peak since the arrival of private television in 1990 (26). Finally, domestic production has experienced a relative 'boom' with 'home produced fiction . . . well received on television, beating all the American product' (29).

Such commercial surveys not only are at odds with academic pessimism; they also provide almost the only data on programme content, noting such trends as the 'diversification into dramas and sitcoms, [which] creat[es] hits like . . . *Médico de familia* (*Family Doctor*), which pulls in shares of over 50 per cent on Telecinco' (29). The pleasures of such domestic narratives, clearly central to public entertainment and information in Spain, deserve a sympathetic and informed analysis in both their institutional and artistic aspects, an analysis that they have yet to receive.

## Telecinco

Telecinco firmly believes in the free competition that characterizes a true market and in profitability as the only business strategy.

(Telecinco 1999a: 'Telecinco hoy: introducción')<sup>3</sup>

If ever there was a candidate for television as 'bad machine', it would appear to be Telecinco. It was Telecinco that pushed the envelope for sex programming at the start of the 1990s with the notorious stripping game show *¡Uf, qué calor!*. With a shifting team

of majority foreign stockholders that evaded Spanish legislation and includes Berlusconi's Fininvest, it is also exemplary of Maxwell's privatized, globalized juggernaut. Detailed engagement with broadcasting history, however (not to mention formal analysis of programme content), points to a different and more complex story, one in which, paradoxically perhaps, loss of ratings led to an increase in innovative, in-house production.

Brief reports in the trade press document the chequered history of Telecinco. In 1990 'Telecinco[']s launch [was] under threat' (Grabsky 1990), with the future of the nascent company in jeopardy after a boardroom struggle between publishing group Anaya, which favoured news and cultural programming, and Berlusconi and ONCE (Spain's national organization for the blind), which preferred movies and mini-series. By 1994, when strip, game and reality shows had lost their novelty value, *Cineinforme* reported (Anon. 1994) that Telecinco was 'in search of a new identity', attempting to correct a loss of share through a new programming policy that emphasized original programming. By 1996 share had increased by two points to 21.5 per cent of national viewing, and Spanish publishing group Correo increased its stake (Scott 1996). The year 1997 saw reports both that Berlusconi and his brother faced fraud charges over management of Gestevisión, a subsidiary of Telecinco, in 1991–3 (del Valle 1997) and that 'Telecinco plans expansion into the Americas' (Green 1997), capitalizing on in-house productions that were now 'the most popular in Spain'. Finally, in 1998, the Supreme Court ruled that the granting of private TV licences by the Spanish government in 1989 (to Canal Plus and Gestevisión-Telecinco), which remained controversial, was indeed lawful (Pérez Gómez 1998).

Once more it is *Television Business International* that gives the fullest account of Telecinco's 'turn around', based as it is on two aspects of managerial 'quality': corporate restructuring and industrial standards (*TBI* 1997). After aggressive competition for audience share with rival private web Antena 3 had led to falling ratings and mushrooming debt, Maurizio Carlotti was brought in from Italy by Fininvest as director general in 1994 (22). Attacking the 'financial chaos rampant in the Spanish television sector', Carlotti rapidly reduced debt and cut staff, announcing that Telecinco 'would no longer compete to be an audience leader'. Relieved of this burden and with a modest target share of 18–21 per cent, 'paradoxically', writes *TBI*, '[Telecinco has been] allowed to take the lead' with distinctive new formats including satirical gossip shows, mixes of news and humour, and Letterman-style talk (23). Key, however, is fiction production, with Telecinco's own studios nicknamed 'the

Fiction Factory' and substantial investment committed to feature films and expansion to the Americas (23). Such industrial and cosmetic changes (a new logo and design) are 'aimed especially at promoting a youthful, fashionable image to attract the more middle class audience that Telecinco is increasingly directed toward'.

Like NBC in the 1970s, then, Telecinco sought, temporarily at least, a select demographic (young, wealthy and urban) in the belief that quality could make more money than the *telebasura* for which they were once notorious. And by looking at Telecinco's own policy documentation, we can move, as Corner recommends, from historical contexts and institutional settings to production mentalities and practices. We will also be able to analyse one crucial aspect of managerial quality: 'delivery of schedules in line with stated company policy' (Corner 1999: 106).

Unsurprisingly, Telecinco's own account coincides with the 'turn around' narrative of the trade press (Telecinco 1999a). The introduction to the first section of its website ('Telecinco Today') claims that the Spanish TV market has matured and that Telecinco is known for both its profitability and its innovative programming. 'Professional management' has led to leadership in its target audience ('between 15–54, middle, upper middle and upper class, in towns bigger than 10,000 inhabitants'). The website lays particular emphasis on news programming, based on innovative Digital Editing technology. While state TVE is still ahead for individual bulletins, Telecinco claims to lead in total hours of news ('Telecinco hoy: programación y audiencia').

The account of shareholders and management structure stresses (against popular conception) the 'national and international' make-up of the group: Italian Mediaset (holding company for Fininvest), German producer and distributor Kirch, Spanish multimedia Correo and publisher Planeta ('Accionariado y organigrama'). The description of the Telecinco Group stresses its multimedia holdings, including advertising, news, music, multiplexes and the Picasso Studios ('largest fiction producer in Spain'), and claims that economies of scale have now made Telecinco one of the most profitable channels in Europe.

Significantly, Telecinco claims to combine public values with private markets. The 'independence and credibility' of its news service is one of the 'pillars' of the group ('Informativos Telecinco'); the other is original production. Telecinco promotes its prize-winning talk shows (with live programming a specialty), as it does its in-house drama: 'Original production in series drama is one of the distinguishing features of the chain. Currently Telecinco, through its producer

Estudios Picasso, has many hits including *Médico de familia*, [and] *Periodistas* (*Journalists*)' (1999a: 'Programación'). Such series benefit from their own 'particular style', and are 'intended to satisfy all kinds of audience'. It is in the section on acquisitions and co-productions that the word 'quality', implicit throughout, explicitly appears. 'Cult' US drama imports (*Murder One*, *Ally McBeal*) are also a key characteristic of the channel's programming. It is perhaps no accident that such quality, issue-driven content is directly followed by Telecinco's mission statement of social service: the web is committed to the environment, to social solidarity, and to the audiovisual education of children, a concern for public values shown by its provision of a telephone information service and its increase in subtitled provision for the deaf, as recommended by the Ministry of Culture ('Al servicio de la sociedad').

It would be naive to take such self-presentation without a grain of salt, although the objective data on renewed profitability and innovative programming coincide with the external sources of the trade press. The value of this policy documentation, however, is as evidence of the interplay between institutional settings and production mentalities, between organization and aesthetics. Devoted to profitability and controlled by foreign interests, Telecinco nevertheless sees fit to risk the ratings for a moment, and court viewers with quality domestic drama.

## *Periodistas*: series concept

### Telecinco Launches New Newspaper

Tuesday, 13 January 1998

At 9.30 p.m. Telecinco gives birth to 'Crónica Universal', a weekly newspaper featuring great actors every Tuesday night. Amparo Larrañaga, Belén Rueda, and José Coronado, together with a prestigious cast of 15 fixed characters, play the protagonists in the highly crafted episodes that go to make up the series *Periodistas*. A workplace comedy with dramatic elements, this series represents an important step forward compared to previous series, enjoying as it does significantly higher production values.

(Telecinco 1998b: 1)

The production mentality behind the *Periodistas* concept is revealed by the glossy Telecinco annual report for 1998 (Telecinco 1998a).

Under its four watchwords of ‘innovation, independence, quality, and profitability’ (17), Telecinco promotes its ‘first Fiction Factory’, the Picasso Studios, which produce 400 hours a year with an average of ten projects being shot simultaneously (24). ‘Quality Fiction’ boasts ‘new narrative structures’ (43), including an action series set in a police station, the first series shot wholly in a national park (‘lobbying for the defence of the environment’), an all-female drama and, finally, the first sitcoms and suspense dramas to ‘reproduce North American production systems’ (43). Within this slate, Telecinco’s two crown jewels are *Médico de familia* (with the highest ratings of any programme since the introduction of private TV) and *Periodistas*, distinguished by its workplace setting and topical subject matter (40).

Even more revealing, however, are the publicity materials produced by Telecinco’s press office, and thus unseen by *Periodistas*’ prospective audience. The first press kit came in newspaper form (Telecinco 1998b).<sup>4</sup> Claiming that the series sought to give ‘the more human face of journalists’, it featured the back stories of no fewer than eighteen characters. The ‘luxury cast’ (2) is headed by Luis (José Coronado),



1 *Periodistas*: the ensemble cast of the first season, including Laura (Amparo Larrañaga) and Luis (José Coronado), front row, centre. Courtesy of Telecinco.

a New York correspondent separated from his wife who returns to Spain as head of local news, and Laura (Amparo Larrañaga), a single woman dedicated to her career who is promoted to deputy editor, and thus becomes Luis's immediate boss. Interviews with Daniel Écija, director and executive producer, and Mikel Lejarza, Vice-President of Content at Telecinco, reveal an unstable combination of novelty and tradition in the concept. Écija states that 'We want to push the envelope, not to burst it', while Lejarza claims that 'At Telecinco we like to innovate', but admits that a similar US series would have five times the budget (3). Elsewhere claims are less modest: we are informed that this is the first series in Spain set in a journalistic milieu, and that it draws on 'classic [newsroom] pioneers' such as MTM's *Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Lou Grant* (4); or again, we are told that '*Periodistas* inaugurates a new TV genre', whose main characteristics are a risky shift to the professional arena, away from those 'domestic problems with which the audience can easily identify'. Other novel features include the ensemble cast (both veteran and novice), the high-quality scripts (team-written and co-ordinated), and the exterior sequences, permitted by a relatively high budget.

In a second 'issue' of the mock newspaper sent to journalists on 14 September 1998, the press office gave figures for the first season. Telecinco's gamble had paid off, with an average share of 26.6 per cent and 4,700,000 audience (Telecinco 1998c: 1). It also scored the highest numbers in the most sought-after demographic (given here as '25-44'), an audience which enjoyed its 'new young brand of humour, with a more acid and ironic tone'. Chiming here with the sophisticated, youthful and often female target audience are the novel domestic set-ups: households comprising a divorcé and daughter, male friends, female friends, a separated woman and her child, an unmarried couple, and a single woman and her mother. Issues raised by the second season include the neglect of the elderly, nuclear pollution and the destructive potential of religious sects (1). A follow-up interview with executive Lejarza has him stressing that the first season's episodes on euthanasia, squatting and domestic violence had 'anticipated' the news (2). Moreover, introducing a 'cinema effect' on television, *Periodistas* has enjoyed the 'best image quality' and become the 'best quality series drama' on television (2).

Figures reveal the considerable investment in both financial and human resources required to achieve this goal: after twenty-one episodes the series had used 180 actors, employing 110 people in the production of each episode. And, spurning the sofas and kitchens



2 *Periodistas*: exterior shooting in Madrid, with Blas (Alex Ángulo, left) and José Antonio (Pepón Nieto). Courtesy of Telecinco.

of domestic drama familiar on Spanish TV, it devoted at least two days per episode to location shooting in an often uncooperative Madrid. Of the remaining scenes, 44 per cent are shot in the press room, and 11 per cent in the bar in which the characters socialize, with the home sets of the two principal characters accounting for just 4 and 5 per cent of scenes.

As ratings soared to a peak of over 6 million viewers on 20 April 1999, and the series was sold to Portugal and Italy, it seemed that Telecinco's quest for profit through quality was assured. The hybrid comedy-drama of *Periodistas* trounced prime-time competitors, whether US feature films or domestic drama starring such prestigious film stars as Carmen Maura and Jorge Sanz.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, moving to Monday at 9.50 p.m. (Spanish prime time), *Periodistas* was flanked by two more of the successful generic hybrids for which Telecinco was well known: *El Informal* (news and humour) and *Crónicas Marcianas* (Letterman-style chat and comedy). The schedule was thus in line with stated policy objectives, and delivered the required audience: *Periodistas* has been sponsored by a luxury watch brand, and major advertisers include a high proportion of designer fragrance, cosmetic and hair care products.

Market forces, however, do not exclude social responsibility. Indeed, the series addresses precisely those areas cited in Telecinco's mission statement: the environment (e.g. food safety), solidarity with minorities (prisoners, the homeless, the disabled), and children (child abuse). And with Telecinco's distinctive profile based as much on its news operation as on its original drama, the series fused these two 'pillars'. In a reflexive gesture typical of MTM's quality drama, it thus incorporated the debate over informational independence and authority into its characteristic plots. Indeed, the fact that the drama anticipated the news (with an episode on euthanasia preceding a real-life drama on the same theme by just days) lent *Periodistas* added expository value, routinely denied news programmes criticized for being overly dependent on narrative. Executive Lejarza claims that television is not good or bad, only up to date or out of date (Telecinco 1998c: 2). The apparently uncanny topicality of *Periodistas* testifies to its closeness to Spanish audiences, a closeness that reflects their national tastes and traditions more pleasurably (and profitably) than rival and lower-rated transnational production: in a typical week (22–28 March 1999) *Periodistas* stood at second place in the charts (after a national football match), while Schwarzenegger's *The Last Action Hero* was at nine and Telecinco's prize import *Ally McBeal* at ten.<sup>6</sup>

The Telecinco website has featured a group photo of the cast of *Periodistas* inviting viewers to participate in an on-line activity: sending the picture and autograph greetings of your favourite star to a friend by e-mail. This is unusually explicit evidence for the parasocial function of TV stars as intermediaries between viewers, evidence that can also be gleaned from press coverage. The press clippings for March 1999 (some 200 pages in length) focus either on public manifestations of the quality of the series (the award of prestigious prizes to its actors, including one from the readers of respected film periodical *Fotogramas*) or on gossip about their private lives (paparazzi shots in magazines such as *Interviú* which blur the divide between real and fictional partners and pregnancies) (Telecinco 1999b). Such coverage reveals the erosion of informational values which Corner had suggested is typical of TV 'stories', whether news or drama. But it seems clear that *Periodistas* has succeeded in its attempt to blend social understanding and emotional engagement in a way that counts as 'quality' for an audience as diverse as movie buffs and gossip addicts. And focusing as it does on the news production process (making explicit the 'goalkeeper' function of the media), the series overtly poses the journalistic questions 'Is it true? Is it false?' typical



3 *Periodistas*: the newsroom set, with Willy (Joel Joan, third from right) and Ali (Esther Arroyo, far right). Courtesy of Telecinco.

of print culture, even as it asks the ‘How does it feel?’ and shows us the ‘How does it look?’ typical of the electronic media.

Is there, then, a ‘Telecinco style’, analogous to the ‘MTV style’? While Telecinco is hardly an ‘indie prod’, and its executives prefer not to make comparisons with US product, *Periodistas* is, in fact, strikingly similar in form to the pioneering North American workplace dramas and sitcoms. The topicality, generic fusion and technical innovation are comparable; the development and delayed resolution of deep and surface plot lines, the ‘rounding’ of characters through unexpected facets, and the shifts in tone from comedy to pathos, all are familiar. More precisely, the muted piano and wind theme tune cites *Hill Street Blues* as clearly as the morning meeting which begins each episode and re-establishes the ensemble cast for the viewer. But perhaps the clearest sign of *Periodistas* novelty in Spain is an aspect that diverges from the US models. While North American titles are typically enigmatic or laconic (*Hill Street Blues*, *LA Law*, *ER*), the Spanish title is terse but unambiguous. Unfamiliar with the workplace format in domestic product, Spanish audiences were perhaps felt to need more explicit framing in order to prepare themselves for Telecinco’s relatively risky venture.

## *Periodistas*: specimen episode

Episode 28 (21 December 1998)

‘Dos con leche y uno solo’<sup>7</sup>

Grandfather Manolo and his friend Matías (from *Médico de familia*) appear in the press room of *Crónica Universal*. The reason for their visit is that they have found a finger in a tin of food and decide to use their friendship with Herminio, the caretaker at the newspaper, to get publicity for their misadventure. At first no one takes them seriously but Luis then insists José Antonio take up their case. Laura is feeling unwell. Mamen advises her to get a check up, but Laura has been prudent and has already had tests. To surprise all round, the results show she is pregnant. Willy and Clara do a report on how winning the lottery can change your life. In order to illustrate the story, they interview a middle aged woman who became a millionaire a year ago thanks to the lottery. This woman will try to win over Willy’s affections, awakening strange reactions in Clara. Blas is not coping well with his separation from Mamen, especially in this festive season. He is so upset that he winds up getting drunk at the office Christmas party. Mamen, for her part, feels guilty at having caused this situation.

(Telecinco 1998d)

This Christmas episode of *Periodistas* is perhaps atypical of the series as a whole, lacking both topicality and the hard issues for which the drama is known. However, the guest appearance by members of Telecinco’s other hit *Médico de familia*, typical of special ‘event’ programming for the holidays, is not simply an example of gratuitous cross-promotion, but rather raises important questions of cultural taste and audience profile central to *Periodistas*’ production and reception. More characteristically, the social issues that are raised are immediately personalized: the plot line of the finger found in the tin of (archetypal) chickpeas is here treated humorously, shown as it is from the point of view of the elderly characters familiar to audiences from the other show. (In other episodes, nuclear contamination, say, will be presented with proper seriousness.) And the journalistic ‘story’ on the social effects of the lottery becomes regular character Willy’s attempted seduction by an attractive, independent middle-aged winner who appears only in this episode. Typical, however, of the screenwriters’ avoidance of cliché is that the latter has not been adversely affected by her sudden wealth, but rather has taken pleasure in and advantage of it, seeing young, sexy Willy (the programme’s inveterate Don Juan) as yet another promising acquisition.

The pre-credit sequence, set in Luis's kitchen at breakfast time, introduces this continuing theme of comic or ironic reversal of sex and age roles. With typical overlapping dialogue, Luis argues loudly with Blas (prize-winning Basque film actor Alex Ángulo) about how to use the toaster. Deftly and silently, Luis's teenage daughter solves their problem. The tone is subtly modulated here. Blas is recently separated from wife Mamen, hence his presence in Luis's flat, typical of the casual and consensual households in a series which features not one married couple with children. And when Blas battles with the toaster, moaning 'I don't understand it', he is clearly also referring to his marital problems, which will trace a narrative arc in the following hour.

This episode, which credits three directors and scriptwriters,<sup>8</sup> features eleven locations and some twenty-seven segments, of which seven are shot as exteriors. The latter amount to only ten minutes in all (the same as the single establishing sequence in the newsroom), and are frequently unmotivated by the plot. When Laura and Mamen discuss Christmas preparations while strolling in a shopping mall, the effect is topical, given the time of year, but hardly dramatic. Such exteriors seem intended to reinforce the quality 'look' and reputation which Telecinco's press agency promoted so vigorously. Conversely, a late sequence shot in the crowded pedestrian shopping areas south of Madrid's Gran Vía provides a moment of what Schröder calls 'ecstatic' release from the everyday (1992: 213). Blas spots Mamen in the crowd and, as they embrace, reconciled, the camera first circles around them before soaring above the festive shoppers in a rare crane shot.

In interiors the main technical innovation is the steadycam. The sinuous unbroken takes (reminiscent of a less frenetic *ER*) are used to disorientating effect in the post-credit newsroom sequence, where we follow the elderly visitors through the bustling, cluttered set, as they are fobbed off by each of the regular characters in turn. The public space of the open-plan newsroom, subdivided into the semi-private spaces of kitchen and bosses' offices, serves, like the other recurring location of the downstairs bar, to facilitate the interconnection of the various personal and professional relationships. Not only do Luis and Laura, Blas and Mamen, Willy and Clara (three couples displaying distinct forms of conflict) share the same spaces; they are typically joined by camera movement (panning or tracking shots) which fluidly links one piece of dialogue to the next. In a very wordy episode, with none of the set-piece action sequences on which the series prides itself (an explosion in a service station, a car pitching into a reservoir), same sex discussions, marking solidarity and

friendship, alternate with opposite sex arguments, reflecting both desire and distrust. Typically, however, when pregnant boss Laura gives deserted secretary Mamen a sisterly hug, the ‘warm moment’<sup>9</sup> is ironically undercut by Mamen’s wary reaction: career woman Laura has not previously been known for offering emotional support.

The mix of comedy and pathos is characteristically combined with deep-level plot lines that remain unresolved and surface stories concluded by the end of the hour. The main example of the former is the sexual and professional tension between Luis and Laura, central to the concept as described in Telecinco’s initial press kit, which cites the premiss of US comedy-drama of the 1980s *Moonlighting* (Telecinco 1998b: 2). When, in the first half, Luis chooses to commit to Laura, she rejects his attempt to take over her life and considers abortion; when she decides to commit to him at the end, he rejects her in turn, having just learned that he has also impregnated the wife from whom he is separated. Surface stories include the comic subplot of the severed finger (whose origin is revealed at the end) and the seduction of the great seducer Willy (who finally rejects his protector’s tempting offer). As in all quality drama series, continuing narrative threads are used to lend regular characters unexpected traits and thus render them ‘round’: the sexy, superficial and impoverished Willy was hardly likely to reject a wealthy patron, as he does; Luis, a paragon of professional ethics, is, as his young daughter reminds him in a comic reversal, unforgivably careless in his private life; ambitious Laura, who has always resisted her mother’s advice to marry and have kids, suddenly sees the attractions of maternity. In this female-led character comedy, plot, psychology and tone are interdependent.

When Laura complains to Mamen that men are a different species to women, she ruefully qualifies this: men are the inferior species. Flattering the female audience with a gallery of attractive and active urban women, *Periodistas* also courts youth. Laura’s mother (the only older person in the regular cast) is impossible; the elderly visitors are patronized by the journalists (and audience) even as they complain of discrimination on the basis of age, the kind of issue taken seriously in other episodes. More importantly, this episode appeals to a distinctive cultural context that contradicts Maxwell’s assertion that a globalized Spanish TV is ‘no longer fit for a nation’ (1995: 153). The episode is dense with references to specifically Spanish practices associated with the festive season and variably integrated into the plot lines: the lottery (whose singing children are imitated by the office clown), Mamen’s purchase of too much *turrón* in the shopping mall (the sign of her personal problems), the grapes of

New Year's Eve, and the gifts of *Reyes*. Arguably the most distinctively national element, however, is the language itself, with its multiple registers and references. The episode title 'Dos con leche y uno solo' thus features an untranslatable pun. Apparently referring to 'Two white [coffees] and one black', the double pregnancy plot reveals it to mean 'Two inseminated [women] and one solitary man'. Condemned to lose in translation the idiomatic ambiguity of US titles (as in the pallid Spanish version *Canción triste de Hill Street*), domestic drama here exploits a peculiarly Spanish tolerance for obscenity that would be inadmissible on the US networks.

Fit for the *estado de las autonomías*, *Periodistas* makes little of its Madrid location, and takes care to include representatives in its choral cast of the historic nationalities and regions: Mamen is Galician, while trainee José Ramón and gossip columnist Ali are Andalusian. But *Periodistas* also acknowledges that an awareness of cosmopolitan culture is part of the Spanish urban life-style that the series both reflects and fosters. A visit to a sushi bar or a bookstore-cum-café are everyday occurrences in *Periodistas* not likely to be available to viewers in Albacete. Satirical colleagues compare Willy to Richard Gere in *American Gigolo* ('He started with silk shirts and ended up a Buddhist'), while sophisticated Ali compares the noisy antics of the *Médico de familia* household to US prime-time soap of the 1980s *Falcon Crest*.

What Maxwell calls the 'bonds between regional, national, and transnational media spaces' (Maxwell 1995: p. xxv) are played out in such dialogue. But the festive incursion of Telecinco's most popular comedy into its most prestigious drama raises questions of cultural taste and competing definitions of quality repressed by a normal episode. Sitting on the domestic sofa and eating lentils in the family kitchen (precisely those locations that the *Periodistas*' concept sought to avoid), José Ramón and Ali can barely conceal their distaste. Broadly acted, crudely stereotypical, and unapologetically domestic and everyday, *Médico de familia* represents another, older appeal to 'the popular' by the same channel and studio. Ideologically ambiguous (difficult to 'police'), *Periodistas* here both underscores the textual borders between its self and its other (between cosmopolitan sushi and parochial lentils) and incorporates that earlier cultural profile into its own broad framework. This incorporation is quite literal: in an atypically farcical moment José Ramón believes that he has ingested the missing finger along with the lentils he has so greedily consumed in the family kitchen. Poised once more between repetition and innovation, *Periodistas* dare not desert a mass prime-time audience even as it addresses itself to the quality demographic.

## Stop the Press

A night spent viewing Telecinco leaves the British spectator as disorientated by the integrated 'flow' of images as Raymond Williams was in Miami. The presenters of satirical gossip show *El Informal* promote *Periodistas* within their own programme; a split-screen display combines the names and logos of the sponsor (spokesperson Antonio Banderas), network and programme; and the one-minute, pre-credit sequence is followed by a full seven minutes of commercials and promos (including a preview of the late night talk show *Crónicas Marcianas* that will follow *Periodistas*). This is the first of three extended breaks which will take the sixty minutes of drama to the scheduled hour and a half. Given this constant interruption, it is perhaps unsurprising that Telecinco's much-trumpeted lead on Monday nights (all three shows are number one in their respective time slots) disguises fluctuations in viewer attention documented by independent figures: *Periodistas*' 'peak' audience and share, however, are attested to at 11.40 p.m. on 19 April 1999 with an astonishing 7,900,000 viewers and 51 per cent (Telecinco 1999c (unpaginated)).

If this 'blocking' of key shows on a single evening of 'must-see TV' is reminiscent of US network scheduling, the late hour of peak viewing is a reminder of the distinctively national profile of Spanish domestic rhythms, alien indeed to US definitions of prime time. Yet we have seen that each of the terms I have used in this chapter is problematic. 'Spanish' television is, as Maxwell warns, infiltrated by powerful multinationals. 'Quality' television may best be illustrated not by RTVE's adaptations of literary classics but by Telecinco's re-creations of North American workplace dramas. And 'television' itself is hardly self-sufficient, embedded as it is in multimedia holding companies that embrace print, music and cinema. Telecinco itself has recently funded major feature films, including Alex de la Iglesia's *Muertos de risa (Dying of Laughter)* (1999). I have argued, however, that these terms are not to be abandoned too soon by cultural critics dazzled by globalization and neglectful of programme content. *Periodistas* is significant as a genuine innovation in distinctively national programming in a country in which (unlike the UK or USA) there is no lasting tradition of domestic TV drama. If *Periodistas*' production values or plotting do not reach the standard of its Hollywood models, they clearly fulfil the stated aims of Telecinco's 'quality' policy documents. And *Periodistas*' enviable ratings and share demonstrate the uncanny persistence of the networks, still able to unite the nation around an 'event' programme in the supposed age

of multichannel fragmentation and digitalization. As one Telecinco executive told *Television Business International*, 'We believe the business is in the content and not in the highways' (TBI 1997: 23).

The shift from domestic sitcom to workplace drama (from *Médico de familia* to *Periodistas*) does register, however, what Corner calls the move from an earlier 'ideology of the home' to a more recent 'individualized commodity taste' (Corner 1999: 90), facilitated by the multichannel dispersal of uses and gratifications. As we have seen, *Periodistas* implicitly addresses this shift by incorporating *Médico*'s domesticated stars as guests into its Christmas episode, even as the fragmented and conflictive households of its regular characters testify to profound social change. Likewise, *Periodistas*' self-conscious dramatization of social issues (with journalist-protagonists typically spending twenty-four hours in a wheelchair or taking to the fashion catwalk in pursuit of their 'story') attests to the viewer's desire to be both engaged by and distracted from potentially unpleasurable problems ignored by the traditional formats of Spanish television.

Corner warns that we should avoid both 'ersatz internationalism' and 'parochial foreclosure' (1999: 3). And a recent report in *Variety* suggests a contradictory situation in which 'as Spanish and American tastes drift further apart, links between the nations' business sectors are becoming tighter' (Hopewell 1999: 33). With the prices paid by Spanish networks for US sitcoms falling from \$20,000 per episode in 1998 to \$12,000–15,000 in 1999, Telecinco's head of acquisitions, Aldo Spagnoli, and RTVE's new director general, Pío Cabanillas (previously based with News Corp in New York), called for co-productions with Hollywood. Wrote *Variety*: 'The call for U.S. studios to Europeanize their product for Spain coincides with the entry of cosmopolitan execs into top-level positions at Madrid-based broadcasters' (40). Speaking back to the North American juggernaut that increasingly courts foreign sales, transnational executives may, ironically, protect and foster distinctively national cultural profiles through their purchasing policy as well as their original productions.

More than twenty years ago, in their classic study of the production process of a British series, Alvarado and Buscombe (1978: 7) noted that television, the source of so many hours of fiction, was critically neglected, while the much smaller sector of theatre was over-represented in both press and academy. The same remains true *a fortiori* of Spanish television drama, which has to my knowledge received no academic attention, while analysis of Spanish cinema (of whatever quality) has greatly increased. If television studies have, in Corner's words, been too often 'the study of a perpetual present'

(121), then the curious but valuable case of Telecinco and *Periodistas* proves that it is worth arresting for a moment the ceaseless electronic flow and stopping the press for critical examination.<sup>10</sup>

## Appendix: *Periodistas*, episode 28 (broadcast 21 December 1998), 'Dos con leche y uno solo'

Executive producer	Daniel Écija
Writers	Olga Salvador, Mauricio Romero, Alex Pina
Script co-ordinators	Pilar Nadal, Felipe Mellizo
Associate producers	Felipe Pontón, Felipe Mellizo
Directors	Daniel Écija, Jesús Rodrigo, Begoña Álvarez
Sound	Juan Carlos Ramírez
Music	Manel Santisteban
Art director	Fernando González
Photography	David Arribas

### Regular cast:

Luis	José Coronado
Laura	Amparo Larrañaga
Clara	Belén Rueda
Blas	Alex Ángulo
Mamen	María Pujalte
José Antonio	Pepón Nieto
Willy	Joel Joan
Ana	Alicia Borrachera
Ali	Esther Arroyo

## Notes

- 1 Maxwell has not changed his position; this statement is repeated verbatim two years later, as is his claim that Spanish programming is very similar to that of the US networks (1997: 265).
- 2 See D'Lugo (1997) for a similar reading of Spanish cinema caught between globalization and regionalization which does, however, pay close attention to content.
- 3 I cite this unpaginated website by its section titles. I have translated from the Spanish all documentation from Telecinco.
- 4 Print advertising for the new series also playfully blurred the boundary between news and drama, presenting the characters in mock news stories.
- 5 For much of its lifetime *Periodistas* has competed with TVE's domestic drama *A las once en casa* or its import *ER*.
- 6 Statistics from the standard independent source, SOFRES.
- 7 This untranslatable title is explained below.

- 8 See chapter appendix for complete credits.
- 9 See Feuer et al. (1984: 37) for MTM's characteristic use of this technique in character comedy. Unlike MTM's generic hybrids, *Periodistas* ends with an unambiguous comic 'tag' as the final credits play.
- 10 My thanks to Alvaro Lucas at the Telecinco Press Office for kindly providing me with a full range of print and video materials, and to Ms Maddy Conway for the loan of a video tape.

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