

# Mask-based fiction: the case of *Polònia* in Catalonia

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- *Mask-based fiction has found in television serials a unique spreading format of a transgressor and carnival-like humour. The author goes briefly through the main satirical programmes of television history, such as Spitting Image or Les guignols de l'Info, up to Polònia, a television show directed by Toni Soler and broadcasted by Televisió de Catalunya. Throughout the text it is examined the formula for success and the main characteristics of this programme of the Catalan television schedule, according to the following variables: the transference, the presence of the double, the pact of silence, and the mutating body.*

## Key words

Television serials, fiction, satire, mask, puppet, *Polònia*, Televisió de Catalunya.

Why is mask-based fiction so supremely important on television? Probably because television serials have provided carnival-type fiction with continuity and repetition that constantly encourage the audience to become an active part. And that's not very normal on most television, determined not to leave any gaps that invite people to exercise one of the genuine pleasures of the spectator, that of feeling you are watching an incomplete work that calls upon you to act, that cannot exist without you. This explains the success, in the past, of the great programmes of reference in comedy, in which one body replaces another, collecting attributes but transforming them, creating a new, mutating personality that appears irreversible. Mask-based programmes propose the creation of a character that the public interprets as the reincarnation of another real figure, which is the initial person but without actually becoming the person, which moves and speaks like the initial person but in a different register that the public can interpret as such, to the point of achieving autonomy, and ultimately with the ominous capacity to replace the initial person. It's as if the activism of the jester, the man who dresses as a king, has found a highly productive format in television serials, because repetition means that the receiver becomes involved in the device, thereby recreating the multidirectional nature inherent in carnival, which plays with all registers: the initial figure, its replacement and the audience that manipulates and dominates it.

The idea of translating carnival-like sarcasm from humorous graphic series to television we owe to British television we owe. Hence the founding nature of the programme *That Was the Week that Was* (1962), with irreverent parodies led by David Frost, who embodied a news presenter with all the tics of news programmes, giving way to news that was zany but, ultimately, not so far removed from reality. On the extensive payroll of scriptwriters for this programme we find two pillars of humorous television of the future, Dennis

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Potter and John Cleese. Potter would forge his own path based on a hallucination of his autobiographical roots that allowed him to provide a priceless caustic portrait of a decaying society. Cleese, on the other hand, created *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, a milestone that seemed insuperable on the path of comical transgression, showing the stupidity of government bureaucracy and also the conservative sentiment rooted in extensive layers of the British population. But it was when *Spitting Image*, was created, in 1984, that the carnival device acquired all its primal weight. The puppets of *Spitting Image*, the genius creation of Peter Fluck and Roger Law, said what the personalities they were replacing didn't dare say, perhaps because a trend was starting to impose itself on international politics (presided over by Reagan, Thatcher and Begin) in which lying, or hiding the truth, was becoming a totally accepted state practice. Given this strategic hypocrisy, the *Spitting Image* puppets became the evidence of this dual morality and their success was a result of this. Any exaggeration was welcome, because it all formed part of a resistance to a ruling power that was both obscure and barefaced. The natural extension of this visionary programme was *Le Bébête Show*, on TF1, and later *Les guignols de l'info* (1988) created by Alain de Greef for Canal+ and which, subsequently, would travel around the chain's different European channels, particularly the Spanish one. In this case, political events were followed more immediately than its British predecessors: the puppets on Canal+ commented on recent political events but completely maintained the blatant force of splitting personalities, so typical of carnival. The programme's acceptance and influence among the public was proverbial, to such an extent that the puppet was increasingly seen as a real mutant of the main figure, not only as its carnival-like inversion. Accusations of unfair influence on the public have accompanied the series to the present day: from blaming them for Chirac's victory to accusing them of having helped to discredit politics at a time when there were huge waves of abstentions. The puppet's function as a substitute reached its peak when, in the Spanish elections of 2004, there was an "electoral debate" between the candidates Rajoy and Zapatero, embodied by their puppets, something which filled a gap left by the candidates themselves, who had not reached an agreement to hold a debate.

## The case of *Polònia*

This is the basic path that leads to *Polònia*, a programme directed by Toni Soler on TV3 that represents a new variation in mask-based fiction. Given its proximity and proven capacity to penetrate the Catalan cultural fabric, it's interesting to analyse some of its variables within the general context of the attributes of carnival-type fiction.

### 1. Transference

In its satirical device, *Polònia* presents a fusion between the puppet and the actor, because actors with masks play the celebrities in question. This presence of an actor's body eliminates some of the transgressing powers of animated puppets who, as they have a different register, can intensify their more carnival-like character: when a puppet acts it can appear autonomous, without editorial control, almost contradicting the moderate will of those in charge of the channel. It's difficult to imagine how the last great scandal affecting *Les guignols de l'info*, in its broadcast on 11 May 2005, where the puppet of the new Pope elect made a gesture from the Third Reich, might be conceivable using the device of an actor playing the Pope. At the moment, it seems clear that puppets have a greater capacity to transgress, both in the political sense and also in the moral sense. The hardcore scenes of the feature film *Team America: World Police* (2004), made by the creator of *South Park*, Trey Parker, who re-used the hitherto innocent puppets of Thunderbirds to transform them into radical transgressors, supposes a significant raising of permissiveness in satirical cinema. Therefore, *Polònia*'s decision to keep the body of a masked actor as a vehicle for its double entails a self-imposed ceiling to the degree of freedom these personalities can re-embodiment. An actor playing a celebrity supposes a closer, more immediate and less "strategic" view, more like the direct opposite of the imitated figure. What is gained in proximity is probably lost in autonomy.

## 2. The presence of the double

The evolution of the founding team of *Polònia* up to its current format is highly significant. Very rarely can we directly witness an experimental process of reflection on the choices made and, in some way, the productivity of mistakes. After taking part in more general programmes, this journey actually started in the programme *7 de notícies* and *Set de nit* (2001), where masks did not yet play an essential role, beyond the register already experienced in *That Was the Week that Was*: actors pretending to be presenters, although one of the presenters (Queco Novell) had really been one, and this change in register could be frankly interesting from the point of view of the public's uncertainty. The programme, made for TV3, was a healthy counterweight to the dumbing down of the channel's humour, which seemed not to be able to raise the tone from mere entertainment or referring only to television itself as a framework for criticism. In this respect, *Set de nit* was an alternative that, albeit briefly, established a more critical horizon with regard to the dominant parameters. The next step for the team took place on a private local television channel, Citytv, where they attempted to transfer to television the device of the radio programme *Minoria absoluta*, which the team had produced on RAC 1. This presented the essential core that would later become *Polònia*, with some of the actors that had taken part in the previous programme and other new actors, coinciding with an electoral pre-campaign. This immediacy, and the desire for visibility on the part of politicians, produced a strange effect with few precedents in television: that of directly confronting the politician and his or her double in the same space, or even the politician and the double of another politician, creating constant tension between the supposedly real register and the carnival-like register. This proved to be uncomfortable from the start, to the point that, when the programme was first broadcast, it was announced that a politician would attend who was at that time immersed in a controversy, and it was necessary to make it clear in the publicity that this famous person would actually be there, that it wouldn't merely be a parody with the politician's double. Curiously, what had not caused any particular problems on the radio, having the personality and his or her imitator coinciding in the same register, eliminated a large part of the transgressing effect on television with the physical presence

of both bodies. The transference from one to the other being so close and being so obvious, the critical effect dissipated, because ultimately the bonhomie of the invited personality would end up imposing itself, against the efforts of the double to make him or her change register. The lesson learned from this error was extremely interesting: in the same way that a puppet of a celebrity acquires the freedom of a critical voice, putting the personality and his or her mask together makes the device too obvious and ends up annulling it. Successive broadcasts demonstrated this paradigm and the programme eventually disappeared after inviting different politicians who did their best to avoid showing their discomfort, which a large part of the public must have also shared because the fight was too one-sided, where the mask had become the centre of attention because it held the power in media terms.

It's interesting to note how, in *Polònia*, this device has been much more controlled and in some way reinterpreted. The "studio visit" by some personalities that have been "carnivalised" is always carried out in a different spatial register to that of the actor playing them, either using a kind of "split screen" dividing them or because the guest only has a slight contact with his or her personality, when the latter, in fact, has apparently stopped acting as such. This learning has been essential in perfecting the format and is a very good reference for the issue in question, namely not forcing the relationship with the double because, although we may have thought otherwise, it is the double who is at a disadvantage as it tends to be criticised more strongly.

## 3. The pact of silence

Is there a relationship between a satirical programme and the political times in which it is made? We have seen how, in the case of the emergence of *Spitting Image*, there was a coinciding perception between the conservative wave in the United Kingdom and the United States and the role played by state lying, making the zaniness of a carnival-like double more necessary and understandable. In the case of *Polònia*, the explosion coincides with the appearance of the tripartite Catalan government, a political moment when the public might feel that, once again, the whole truth was not being told, and might also feel there was a sarcastic

distance between the formality with which agreements were made and the real, not so fraternal feelings that might preside over the life of the parties. This relationship between the programme and the government pact, and also of the pact of silence resulting from this, has greatly influenced the distance with which *Polònia* treats political life, reduced almost to a domestic and internal issue, as a closed world with its own rules where no intrusion can be imagined. This 'closed group' quality has also led to Catalan television programmes in general giving up a certain possibility: that programmes can be exported or at least adapted to an international sphere. As is almost standard in TV3's production, a programme's measure of success only takes into account its effect on the immediate sphere of action, without the slightest requirement concerning the ability to export a satirical model. This limitation has a direct effect on the programme's structure, accelerating more direct humour, referring to events that everyone must be aware of, with the television medium itself almost becoming an area for political action. But it must be said that something of *Polònia* transcends this limitation of surrendering to the everyday, as shown by the success of its collectible DVD, this being a sign that the public has understood the programme beyond the absorption of the present continuous.

#### **4. The mutating body, an early mirror**

The positive reception of *Polònia* is also closely related to the growing importance of the argument of mutation. In fact, this argument replaces that of the double, which had characterised narration concerning the splitting of identities since the times of Victorian morals. A mutant is not exactly a double but a personality who, by splitting off, has created a new figure with attributes of the former personality but constructing a new one that is, unlike a double, irreversible. From this perspective, a programme like *Polònia* provides new ways of appreciating the relationship between the real personality and his or her mask, because the satirical personality has been able to absorb, with greater or lesser success, the attributes of the real personality, to the point of being able to be like him or her, or rather, being like him or her with a different appearance. In such a time of mutant beings, the

creative team of *Polònia* has found a decisive and balanced formula between order and disorder, between the real personality and his or her mask, as a credible fluctuation between the original body and its mutation, a typical variation in terms of 21st century argument: the mutant cannot go back because it has taken on, in its essence, the personality of the other, for which it will always be a kind of early mirror.