

**Grassi, Silvia (2016). *Gender and Sexual Dissidence on Catalan and Spanish Television Series. An Intercultural Analysis*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 284**

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This volume is an important contribution to a growing field: the study of contemporary media and the way this pervasive instrument of domination changes our views, and affects our lives. Since 1983, when TV3 was founded in Catalonia, many things have changed and one can affirm that soap operas have played a significant role, one that up until now had not been meticulously studied. Series such as *Poblenou* (1994), *Ventdelplà* (2005-2010), and *La Riera* (2010-) have been a decisive contribution to the creation and diffusion of a contemporary culture in Catalan. Silvia Grassi's starting point is Louis Althusser's definition of the television medium as an Ideological State Apparatus. This way she builds a sophisticated thesis that examines how gender roles and sexual dissidence are constructed in Spanish and Catalan television series. She focuses on a corpus of narrative materials through a perspective informed by theories elaborated by Anglo-Saxon scholars in gender studies and studies of sexual dissidence.

In the Introduction, Grassi develops the theoretical background of her analysis and points out to the need of this kind of approach to study modern media. She reminds the viewer of Nichi Vendola's words about literature's role in recuperating concealed stories in order to create a sense of belonging for those people who feel excluded from heteronormativity. She also mentions Josep-Anton Fernández's twofold strategy, according to which the demands for equal rights for sexual dissidents are to be the basis for a wider agenda for social equality, to prevent the reproduction of hierarchies on this field of plural identities, efforts would be made to generate an epistemology of multiplicity and complexity.

The first part, "Gender Roles in Soap Operas: A Comparative Analysis of Catalan, British, and American Series", focuses on the construction of gender roles in Catalan soap operas. She grounds her work on what several scholars have previously discussed: Christine Geraghty, Alberto Mira, Ricardo Llamas, Charlotte Brundson, and Dorothy Hobson, are the

'assistants' who help Grassi to articulate her comparative analysis of television content in Spanish and Catalan contexts. This is a corpus that until now has rarely been analysed through this perspective provided by Anglo-Saxon feminist scholars. By adopting a comparative approach and including British and North-American examples, it enriches the range of her inquiry. It makes sense because *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* were the referents that directly inspired the first Catalan series. "Are Soaps a Safe Place? An Analysis of Models of Family and the Construction of a Sense of Community in Soaps" is one of the most discerning chapters in this part. She compares and contrasts the way community and families are represented in British and North American soap operas. In British soap operas a sense of community is crucial whereas in the American ones, it is not constructed at all, because they focus on one single family. Another difference is related to the diverse way in which British and American series represent women as either a source of disruption or maintenance of the order. According to Grassi, Catalan soaps follow the path established by British drama serials in representing a sense of community.

Part two, "Sexual Dissidence on TV. A Comparative Analysis of Catalan, British, and American Series", focuses on the construction of sexual dissidence in Spanish and Catalan television series. To make her research more comprehensive, Grassi has chosen material comprising different genres and series from different channels, both in Spanish and in Catalan and both private and public-funded. She aims to challenge the 'positivity' and 'essentialist' paradigms which have so far dominated the examination of the construction of sexual dissidence in television series, as many television studies have disregarded poststructuralist theories in its evaluation of non-heteronormative characters and storylines.

Using Anglo-Saxon paradigms to re-read Spanish and Catalan texts, Grassi concentrates on a genre - soap opera - with very little glamour, but by applying paradigms of analysis to content and viewing practices of their audiences she manages to provide new insights.

The volume ends with two interviews, with director Esteve Rovira, and with writer Josep M. Benet i Jornet. Both have been witnesses and major players in the issues discussed in Silvia Grassi's book, consequently they add an insider's perspective to the discussion.

Grassi's book is a timely contribution to gender studies and studies of sexuality, a field of study that is fairly new in a Spanish/Catalan context. Her poignant and thoughtful analysis of characters and storylines are an extraordinary tool to explain the role of television as a mediator between individual and collective experiences. As many astute yet convicted politicians know, television conveys powerful messages and meanings, incorporating them into our lives and our sense of ourselves as situated in time and space. The meanings which people produce interacting with television texts are woven into their identity projects. This may be the reason for one

significant conclusion in this book, that is the differences between North American or British series and Catalan ones. The latter aim to sustain a national imagery clearly defined as distinct from the Spanish one. The fulfilling of this purpose can contradict in certain aspects the epistemology of realism that Catalan soaps claim to follow.

Very little attention had been given until now in Spanish and Catalan media studies to the role played by television entertainment programming to the construction of a gender binary system and a heteronormative system. Some attention has been paid to gender and sexual dissidence studies in literature and cinema, but it has not been noticeable as far as television is concerned. Grassi's examination of television narratives deconstructs discriminatory practices, chiefly sexist and homophobic ones. Her contribution to gender studies and studies of sexual dissidence helps dismantle sexist and homophobic discourses, but also to question the strategies used to disrupt them.

This book may come as a shock for the always-restrained Iberian (not Portuguese!) academic world. It is a welcomed wake-up call that Silvia Grassi performs with strength and accuracy. If we agree that television series are cultural products that project a point of view about every society and nation through a narrative ideology, Grassi performs a superb work in helping us understanding the process. She is ready, for example, to tackle the poignant question: when will we have a Catalan or Spanish *Borgen*? Or why not.

