



**Review of Grassi, Silvia, *Gender and Sexual Dissidence on Catalan and Spanish Television Series: An Intercultural Analysis* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 284pp. ISBN: 978-1-4438-9721-1.**

The increase in on-demand platforms, for example Netflix, Amazon Prime and the like, has directly impacted viewing practices in the contemporary Western world. Greater accessibility, availability and affordability in comparison with the increasing costs of cinema-going are significant factors in this paradigmatic shift. Streaming services such as these enable a globalised, border-crossing democratisation of viewing practices insofar as content is available across distinct geographical, as well as historical, boundaries. While television might once have been regarded as low culture unworthy of academic and/or critical attention, this current turn in the consumption of visual culture underscores the importance of televisual production in the context of contemporary society. Silvia Grassi's monograph *Gender and Sexual Dissidence on Catalan and Spanish Television Series: An Intercultural Analysis* makes a vital contribution to the fields of both visual studies and Hispanic studies by undertaking a thorough and systematic analysis of the depiction of gender and sexual identities across a wide range of Catalan and Spanish television series. Specifically, Grassi examines 'how gender roles and sexual dissidence are constructed in Spanish and Catalan television series' by exploring 'the contribution of television entertainment programming to the construction of a gender binary system and an heteronormative system' (1). Consequently, this book will be

of interest to both scholars and students of Spanish visual culture and Spanish culture more generally in addition to scholars and students of visual culture, television studies and gender and sexuality studies more broadly.

Beyond the importance of televisual production as an object of study, Grassi's principal claims are also vital to the contribution this text makes to contemporary visual studies. The stakes of her argument, which concern the pedagogical and social functions and values of television, are at once provocative and necessary in an era in which cultural production, especially in the Spanish context, is consistently devalued by means of austerity measures implemented due to the current economic climate. For Grassi, 'if television cannot quite be an agent for social change, it can at least aspire to be one' (109). This is especially significant in the context of contemporary Spain given that, as the author points out, 'Spanish television enjoys some of the highest per capita viewing figures in Europe and the audience for a single prime-time show is greater than the annual audience for all Spanish feature films' (119). Within this framework, the import of Grassi's contribution is clear and her inclusion of two interviews with prominent and relevant industry personalities, in original language and translation, as appendices underscores the relevance of her work.

Structurally, the book is divided into two main sections. In the first section, the author considers the construction of gender roles in Catalan soap operas and questions to what extent theoretical explorations of British and American soap operas are applicable to 'the content of Catalan soaps and the viewing practices adopted by the audience' (10). This section comprises eight chapters. The first chapter considers feminist critical approaches to television studies while the second chapter unpacks feminist scholarship focused on the content and structure of soap operas in relation to the appeal of this genre to female audiences. Chapter three interrogates the place of the soap as genre within the context of feminist television studies

and chapter four examines viewer responses to soap operas by means of online forums. Chapters five and six compare and contrast Catalan soaps with those produced in the UK and US taking into consideration paradigms of representation (entertainment, melodrama and realism) in the former and the depiction of community and families in the latter. Finally, chapter seven studies the didactic aspirations of Catalan soap operas before chapter eight draws together the author's conclusions. The second part of the book examines the construction of sexual dissidence in Spanish and Catalan television series more broadly. After an introductory chapter establishing the terminology applied, chapter two then explores the academic disinterest in images of non-heteronormativity in television in contrast with cinema. She then considers how television contributes to the visibility of non-heteronormativity in chapter three. The fourth chapter of the second part considers strategies of normalisation in Catalan television while the fifth chapter studies the relationship between essentialist and poststructuralist views of sexuality. The sixth chapter analyses the impact of poststructuralism on a non-heteronormative collective history and the seventh emphasises the significance of the education system in challenging heteronormativity. The corpus for this section is more diverse than that of the first and comprises series of various genres, both privately and publicly funded, aired on distinct channels (11). The objective of this section is 'to challenge the "positivity" and "essentialist" paradigms which have so far dominated the examination of the construction of sexual dissidence in television series' (11). This imperative to avoid categorising images of queer identities as either positive or negative is hugely significant to queer studies and another reason that makes this book an important contribution to relevant fields of study.

The premise of the text and corpus of material, 'constituted by characters and storylines' (1), are highly original. As Grassi herself points out, such a perspective 'has mainly been disregarded by Spanish and

Catalan scholars' (1). Indeed in her introduction, the author bemoans 'the lack of institutional support and interdisciplinarity' within the fields of gender and sexuality studies in Spanish and Catalan universities and outlines the focus on sociology rather than culture in this regard (1). Opening with a comprehensive literature review detailing this phenomenon, Grassi notes that pioneering work of this nature conducted by Spanish and Catalan scholars, such as studies by Angel Sahuquillo, Josep-Anton Fernàndez and David Vilaseca, was completed beyond Spanish and Catalan borders (5). Throughout the text, the author pays close attention to this intercultural dimension of her study, taking into account the parallels but also the distinctions amongst Catalan, British and American soaps. In so doing, she constructs an intricate dialogue between the Spanish and Catalan series that form the object of her analysis and the theoretical frameworks prevalent in both Anglophone and Hispanophone gender and sexuality studies. This is an impressive feat, adeptly achieved by the author, involving the weaving together of a vast body of secondary literature on the topic of visual culture, television, soap operas, queer theory and identity.

A minor criticism would be the absence of stills within the book. The author focuses primarily on plot, narrative and character rather than on close formal analysis of the material, though it should be noted that she does outline, as I have done above, the originality of her study in its focus. Close formal analysis of gender and sexual dissidence in the context of Spanish and Catalan television series would have further enhanced the originality and gravitas of this study. A second minor criticism concerns the voice of the author. Although Grassi knits together an expansive range of arguments from a vast body of secondary literature, at times it feels as though the voice of the author herself is buried beneath those of the scholars and critics she is citing. Despite these slight reservations, overall this is a highly engaging and extremely well-researched monograph that will appeal to a wide range of

scholars and students within the fields of both visual culture and Hispanic studies.

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