

The definition of an own narrative. The Spanish television comedy (1990-2018)

La definición de una narrativa propia. La comedia televisiva española (1990-2018)

A definição de uma narrativa própria. A comédia da televisão espanhola (1990-2018)

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ABSTRACT | In the early nineties, Spanish television fiction began an unprecedented evolution. The aim of this research is to examine, through a content analysis, the defining features of the genre that led this evolution: comedy. The study includes all the comic fiction of Spanish production released between 1990 and 2018 (180 productions on State networks) and analyses it based on its narrative and stylistic characteristics. The results show that, after a brief period of faithful adaptation to the sitcom, the Spanish television comedy began to develop its own identity. Although it retains some of the defining features of the North American canonical reference, such as stereotypical characters, interior settings and the setting in the contemporary world, it has ignored others, like the average duration of 22 to 24 minutes, the introduction of live or prerecorded laughter and the exclusively episodic structure. In addition, the genre, in its Spanish form, has incorporated new features, such as the shift from the comic to the dramatic, the expansion of the number of plots and main characters, and the introduction of continuity plots and other elements of serialization. Likewise, the Spanish television comedy has integrated an important part of the national theater and film tradition.

KEYWORDS: comedy; television; fiction; sitcom; narrative; Spain.

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RESUMEN | A principios de la década de los noventa, la ficción televisiva española inició una evolución sin precedentes. El objetivo de esta investigación es examinar, mediante un análisis de contenido, los rasgos definitorios del género que lideró dicha evolución: la comedia. El estudio contempla toda la ficción cómica de producción española, de ámbito estatal, estrenada entre 1990 y 2018 (180 producciones), y la analiza en función de sus características narrativas y estilísticas. Los resultados demuestran que la comedia televisiva española, tras un breve periodo de fiel adaptación a la sitcom, empezó a desarrollar una identidad propia. Aunque conserva algunos de los rasgos definitorios del referente canónico norteamericano, como los personajes estereotipados, los escenarios interiores y la ambientación en la contemporaneidad, ha ignorado otros, entre los que destaca la duración de entre 22 y 24 minutos, la introducción de risas en directo o enlatadas y la estructura exclusivamente autoconclusiva. Además, el género, en su forma española, ha incorporado nuevos rasgos, como el desplazamiento de lo cómico a lo dramático, la ampliación del número de tramas y personajes principales, y la introducción de tramas de continuidad y otros elementos de serialización. Asimismo, la comedia televisiva española ha integrado parte importante de la tradición teatral y cinematográfica nacional.

PALABRAS CLAVE: comedia; televisión; ficción; sitcom; narrativa; España.

RESUMO | No início da década dos noventa, a ficção televisiva espanhola começou uma evolução sem precedentes. O objetivo dessa pesquisa é examinar, através de uma análise de conteúdo, as características definidoras do gênero que liderou essa evolução: a comédia. O estudo inclui toda a ficção cômica de produção espanhola, em nível estadual, lançada entre 1990 e 2018 (180 produções) e a analisa com base em suas características narrativas e estilísticas. Os resultados mostram que a comédia televisiva espanhola, após um breve período de adaptação fiel à sitcom, começou a desenvolver sua própria identidade. Embora mantenha algumas das características definidoras da referência canônica norte-americana, como personagens estereotipadas, ambientes interiores e o cenário do mundo contemporâneo, ignorou outros, entre os quais destacam a duração de 22 a 24 minutos, a introdução do riso ao vivo ou enlatado e a estrutura exclusivamente autônoma. Além disso, o gênero, em sua forma espanhola, incorporou novos recursos, como a mudança do quadrinho cômico para o dramático, a expansão do número de enredos e personagens principais e a introdução de enredos de continuidade e outros elementos de serialização. Do mesmo modo, a comédia televisiva espanhola integrou uma parte importante da tradição nacional de teatro e cinema.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: comédia; televisão; ficção; sitcom; narrativa; Espanha.

INTRODUCTION

This article derives from a broader research project, focused on the history of programming and television fiction programs in Spain between 1990 and 2010¹. In the first phase of said research, all genres and formats of the television fiction were explored, and the results showed important differences in the evolution of all of them. In the case of comedy, its role in the renewal process of Spanish television fiction from 1990 was evident, as well as its distance from the most international comic television format, the sitcom. This article aims to identify and analyze the defining features of Spanish television comedy since the appearance of private operators. Thus, this work is framed in the studies of the television text from the point of view of the television genre, which means trying to reconstruct the set of rules of its discursive production, the set of distinctive features that characterize its messages: actantial scheme, settings, iconography, narrative and style (Wolf, 1984; Lacey, 2000).

To meet the stated objective, the empirical reference of our analysis is made up of all the comedies released between 1990 and 2018, a total of 180 fiction productions that will be submitted to a quantitative and qualitative content analysis. It is the first systematic approach to the set of comic fictions of the last 29 years, a pioneering work in Spain. Therein precisely lies the originality and relevance of this work.

The end of TVE's monopoly and the configuration of a new industrial television network marked the nineties and the beginning of a key stage for the development of Spanish television fiction. At the end of the eighties, private operators landed in Spain and the television system started a period of fierce competition, which continues to this day. The multiplication of the offer led to an increasing demand for content production, which promoted the industrialization of the sector, the emergence of the first independent production companies specialized in television, and the progressive professionalization of the teams (Diego, 2010).

From this new context, television comedy in Spain has been defining its own identity, conditioned by a specific cultural and industrial context. But how is that identity? What features define it and how have they evolved between the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st? These are precisely the questions that this paper intends to answer.

1. This research has been conducted within the research project *Historia de la Programación y de los Programas de Televisión en España (cadenas de ámbito estatal): de la desregulación al apagón analógico, 1990-2010* (CSO2015-66260-C4-1-P) (History of Programming and Television Programs in Spain (state channels): from deregulation to analog blackout, 1990-2010), funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (Spain).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the transformation process of the Spanish television system, comedy plays a key role (Palacio, 2001), becoming the star product of fiction in the nineties. From the beginning of the competition period, TVE and Antena3 saw comedy as a strategic genre, both for budgetary reasons and for its audience success. The private channel became the leader in national fiction production thanks to *Farmacia de Guardia* (1991-1995), a major bet by Antena3 that adapted the model of the traditional sitcom. TVE, in its quest to remain economically viable in an unprecedented competition scenario, developed a strategy marked by the reduction of production costs and founded the *Taller de Telecomedias* (1990-1994), an internal production laboratory similar to the international benchmark: the sitcom.

In general terms, the production of television fiction underwent important changes. As part of a mainly economic strategy, video graphic format was generalized (Barroso & Tranche, 1996). In addition, the long-term vocation was introduced. In a new scenario, marked by competition, the loyalty of the audience became a necessity, a fact that prompted the networks to present proposals that could last more than one season on the air.

However, the unprecedented evolution of the television system, begun in the first half of the nineties, did not reach its climax until the second half, when one of the most significant changes was consolidated: the interest of the Spanish audience in national fiction productions (Contreras & Palacio, 2001), a change that positioned them in prime time (García de Castro, 2002; Puebla Martínez, 2012), displacing North American productions (Bustamante & Álvarez Monzoncillo, 1999). The triumph of own fiction defined the second half of the 1990s (Rueda Laffond & Chicharro Merayo, 2006) and its enormous presence in prime time was an unprecedented event (Palacio, 2001; García de Castro, 2002).

Nacho G. Velilla, creator of *7 vidas* (Tele5, 1999-2006) and its spin-off, *Aída* (Tele5, 2005-2014), also underlines the importance of the second half of the nineties, recalling the progress, unknown in Europe, experienced by Spanish television fiction:

No one has invaded their prime time with series, no country, England a little, but it was not like Spanish fiction that, suddenly, we went from watching Rich Man, Poor Man or Starsky and Hutch to watch *Médico de familia*, *Farmacia de guardia*, *Periodistas*, *Compañeros*, *7 vidas*... That happened in a very short time and there was a demand for talent [...]. (Mendíbil, 2013, pp. 158-159).

As a result of the success and consolidation of national fiction, comedy in particular also underwent a significant transformation after 1995, with remakes of American sitcoms and attempts to fit local stories into the structure of this format gave way to a new type of comic television product. Diego and Grandío (2014) point out that, since its

inception, television comedy in Spain was configured from the mix of three traditions: the theatrical genre of comic sketches, the cinematographic comedy of the 60s, 70s and 80s, and the sitcom. Regarding the comic production released three decades later (between 1990 and 1995), Barroso and Tranche (1996) highlight practically the same traditions: a hybrid between the Anglo-Saxon sitcom, the classic TVE comedies and the cinematic comedy of developmentalism (*landismo*). In short, the sitcom has been instrumental in shaping the comic genre in Spain. However, the Anglo-Saxon format has not consolidated on the national programming. Gordillo Álvarez (2015) attributes this to the low echo of the Spanish sitcoms released between 1990 and 1994, although there are other reasons, such as the evident incompatibility of their duration (approximately 22-24 minutes) with the tendency of Spanish channels to dedicate the prime time to a single program to increase their commercial profitability.

Spanish television comedy has aroused great academic interest. However, case analyzes have been prioritized. For example, *Médico de familia* (Tele5, 1995-1999) and *Los Serrano* (Tele5, 2003-2008) have been addressed by Medina (2008), while Smith (2006) and Fernández and Abajo (2007) have analyzed the production of *Aquí no hay quien viva* (Antena3, 2003-2006). *7 vidas* has been the center of the work of Grandío and Diego (2009) and Puebla Martínez (2015), while its spin-off, *Aída*, has been analyzed, from various perspectives, by Capel (2007), Biscarrat and Meléndez Malavé (2014), González de Garay and Alfeo (2012) and Pao (2014). Other successful television comedies, such as *Plats bruts* (TV3, 1999-2002) or *El fin de la comedia* (Comedy Central, 2014-2017), have also been the subject of academic study (Martínez García, 2009; Adarve Martínez, 2017).

Other works have focused on limited time periods or specific subgenres. The first group would include the works presented by Diego and Grandío (2014) and Hidalgo Marí and Ferrer (2018): the first deals with TVE comic productions between 1956 and 1975, while the second focuses on premieres produced between 1990 and 1995. In the second group we can highlight the studies by Hidalgo Marí (2018) and Hidalgo Marí, Tous Roviroso and Morales Morante (2019), exclusively dedicated to the subgenre of domestic television comedy.

Finally, it is necessary to highlight the compilation work of Puebla Martínez (2012) focused mainly on the sitcom, as well as the classification exercises proposed by Diego and Grandío (2011) and Gordillo Álvarez (2015). In this work, however, we intend to cover the entire comic production of the last 30 years.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the research is to identify and determine the defining characteristics of the Spanish television comedy in the last three decades. To do so,

we propose an analysis focused on the structure of audiovisual stories. However, it is not a narratological analysis (Barthes, 1977; Genette, 1989) in which a small sample of the productions of that period is dissected, based on the narrative structure. The objective is to study all the Spanish television comedy of the last thirty years to identify, quantify and analyze the presence of certain recurring stylistic and narrative features, and determine whether, based on their frequency of appearance, they are defining or not for the whole of the genre and its evolution throughout the period studied. Therefore, the research is based on content analysis “as research” (Cassetti & Di Chio, 1999), a technique that, in addition to contemplating data numerically, “supports and integrates it with a greater interpretive effort” (p. 246). Thus, the quantitative nature of the content analysis will allow us to identify, in terms of frequency of appearance, the relevance or exceptionality of a variable to determine its relevance as a defining trait, while the qualitative analysis of the data will allow us to understand how said trait is incorporated into the text as a whole and its evolution over the three decades.

The methodology used is derived from the proposal of Lacalle and Gómez (2016) and, therefore, it has been conducted in two phases: 1) the construction of an analysis guide and the coding of the data from the viewing of the programs, and 2) computation of data and qualitative analysis of results. In this way, the first phase has provided us with a descriptive database, while the second has allowed us to *interrogate* the texts examined on those relevant aspects in their narrative construction.

The analysis guide is structured based on an independent variable, the year of production premiere, and 14 dependent variables: broadcast channel, episode duration, format, broadcast time slot, time period, narrative time structure, shooting and setting, protagonism, subgenre, narrative structure, number of plots per episode, character types, original idea or adaptation, and introduction of live or prerecorded laughs (see table 1). The descriptive database, derived from the coding process, has allowed us to execute the univariate analysis, through the nominal variables and the frequency tables, as well as a bivariate analysis, which allows us to cross the variable year of release (independent), the channel, the format and the subgenre with the rest of the variables and start the data analysis.

While the first nine variables, as well as number 14 (original idea), are general in nature and come from the aforementioned methodological proposal (Lacalle & Gómez, 2016), the rest respond to the main characteristics of the sitcom identified by scholars of the format, such as Mintz (1985), Marc (1989), Neale and Krutnik (1990), Abelman (1998), Álvarez Berciano (1999) and Mills (2001, 2005 & 2009). We start from this format since the previous studies have already indicated its high incidence in the configuration of the identity of the Spanish television comedy.

However, the set of results will also be interpreted according to the other traditions, local and foreign, that have conditioned the identity and evolution of this genre.

It should be noted that the variable level of audience has also been considered and collected, but not analyzed independently. The enormous differences experienced by the Spanish television system between 1990 and 2018 do not allow comparing, on equal terms, the audience results of comic fictions. This variable, however, has been decisive in defining the study sample. The research addresses the 180 comic productions premiered on Spanish television at the state level in the last 29 years. It is worth mentioning that this study also includes six serial productions that, despite their high dramatic content, were presented as comedies, a fact that explains the difference in the number of premieres noted in a previous study.

In line with the high rate of failures characteristic of the audiovisual sector (García de Castro, 2002), 119 productions, i.e., 66.1% of the total sample, did not meet the expectations of the networks and were either withdrawn before the end of their first season, or they were not renewed for a second one. The remaining 61 have had continuity on screen (two or more seasons on the air). The viewing of the first 119 includes, as a minimum, the first and last episode broadcast, while in the case of the second, the first full season and the first and last episode of each subsequent season have been analyzed. Thus, it has been possible to identify all the variables contemplated in the analysis guide, as well as to detect possible variations in the same production along its seasons. TV movies and miniseries, given their brevity, have been watched in their entirety.

RESULTS

Release year

In the period analyzed, there is a sustained decrease in the number of comic releases: 68 between 1990 and 1999; 64 between 2000 and 2009, and 48 between 2010 and 2018 (see figure 1). In the first two decades, more than 60% of the premieres are concentrated in the second five-year periods: between 1995 and 1999, 63.2% (43 productions) of the comedies of the entire decade premiered, while the period between 2005 and 2009 repeats the situation with 60.9% (39 productions). In the first case, as already mentioned, it is because Spanish television fiction experiences its definitive emergence from 1995. In the second, the increase in premieres responds to the appearance of two new competitors, Cuatro and LaSexta, who also release comic fiction. These two decades also represent the highest frequency of audience hits. During the first one, for example, *Médico de Familia*, *Hostal Royal Manzanares* (TVE1, 1996-1997), *Manos a la Obra* (Antena3, 1998-2001) and *7 vidas* were broadcast, while in the second one, popular and remembered productions as *Aída*,

1. Release year	Expressed in integers between 1990 and 2018	
2. Broadcast channel	Open TV	TVE1
		TVE2
		General-interest
		Antena3
		Cuatro
		Tele5
		LaSexta
	Pay TV	Thematic
		Neox
		Nitro
		FDI
		Others
		Canal+
		Movistar+
Pay TV	Comedy Central	
	Amazon Prime Video	
	Others	
3. Duration per episode	Up to 30 minutes	
	Between 30 and 60 minutes	
	More than 60 minutes	
4. Format	Series	
	Serial	
	Miniseries	
	TV movie	
	Shortcom ²	
	Microseries	
	Anthology	

2. Term that has become popular to distinguish sketch programs based on original and fictional characters from humorous sketch programs that satirize media figures or circumstances. Thus, this category excludes imitation programs, such as *HomoZapping* (Antena3, 2003-2007; Neox, 2016-2018) or *Polònia* (TV3, 2006-), among others..

5. Time slot	Morning
	Afternoon
	Access prime time
	Prime time
	Late night
6. Time period	Past
	Present
	Future
	Others
7. Time structure of the story	Lineal
	Recurring use of anachronism
8. Shooting and setting	Interior
	Mixed (interiors and outdoors)
	Outdoor:
	Urban
	Rural
9. Protagonism	Individual
	Choral
Couple	
	Sentimental
	Not sentimental or comic duo
10. Subgenre	<i>Domestic comedy or domcom</i>
	<i>Workplace comedy or workcom</i>
	<i>Palcom (friends' comedy)</i>
	<i>Couplecom (Romantic comedy)</i>
	Comedy of opposites
	Neighborhood comedy
	Variety comedy
11. Narrative structure	Episodic and self-contained (closed structure)
	By episodes and serialized (open structure)
12. Number of plots per episode	Expressed in integers between 2 and 6

13. Type of characters	Plain and stereotyped	
	Round and threedimensional	
14. Original idea	Original idea	
	Adaptation	Origin
		Television
		Cinematographic
		Literary
Others		
15. Laughter introduction	Inclusion of prerecorded laughs	
	Inclusion of live laughs (audience presence on the set)	

Table 1. Analysis guide

Source: Own elaboration.

La que se avecina (Tele5, 2007-) or *Doctor Mateo* (Antena3, 2009-2011) premiered. In contrast, the 2000 to 2004 period has the least number of comic successes in the last three decades, because of the profusion and success of reality shows.

Channel

The leading channel in number of premieres is Antena3 (54 productions), although closely followed by TVE1 (50 productions). These two concentrate most of the comic releases between 1990 and 2004 (77.7% and 70 productions). However, the boost to the genre by Tele5 and the two new competitors (Cuatro and La Sexta), increased the number of premieres and balance the proposals by channels in the second half of the 2000s. During the last decade, the open thematic channels (Neox, FDF and Nitro) and paid channels (Canal+, Comedy Central, Movistar+ and Amazon Prime Video) have also opted for comedy and, although they have not managed to increase the total number of premieres per decade, they have expanded the number of channels that broadcast national comic fiction.

TVE1, Antena3 and Tele5 monopolize the majority of successes but, while the Antena3 and Tele5 comedies continue to work on the air, the main public network has not re-released a successful comic production since *Ana y los 7* (2002-2005).

Duration

In Spain, the duration of the television comedy is far from conforming to the norm of the sitcom. 63.3% (114 productions) of the premieres have lasted more than 30 minutes: 73 productions last between 40 and 60 minutes, while the remaining 41 are more than one hour long. It is from 1995 when the progressive differentiation between the length of national comedies and those from North America begins to manifest. While titles of less than 30 minutes (64% and 16

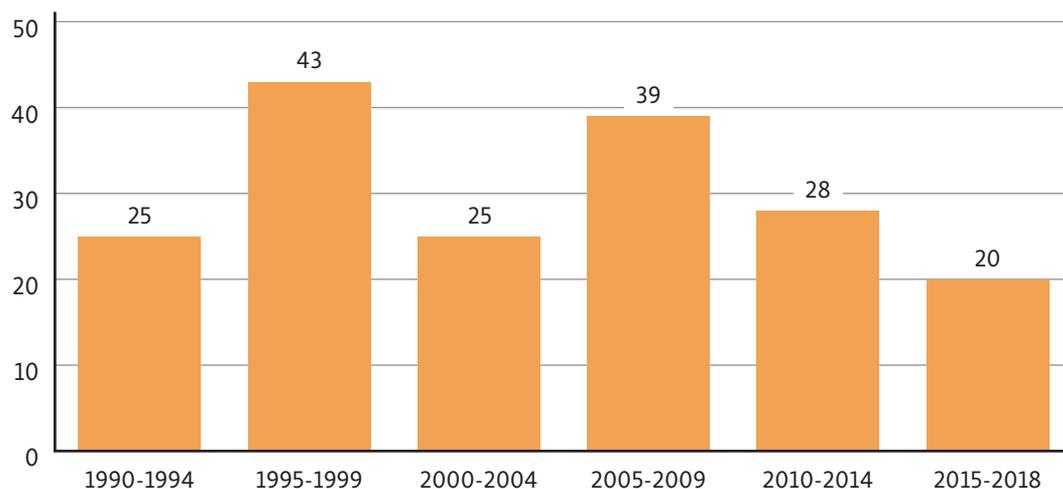


Figure 1. Comic releases per five-years periods (N)

Source: Own elaboration.

productions) predominated in the first five years, in the second half of the 1990s the average duration extended to 48 minutes. The trend towards systematic lengthening continues to rise between 2000 and 2009, placing the average duration at around 60 minutes. A paradigmatic example of the lengthening of deliveries is *¡Ala ... Dina!* (TVE1, 2000-2002), fiction with an average duration of 30 minutes in its first three seasons and 70 in the fourth and last.

Finally, although between 2010 and 2018 the number of productions with episodes longer than 60 minutes has increased, the average duration has remained at 50 thanks to shortcoms and productions of open and paid thematic channels, mostly lasting less than 30 minutes.

While on TVE1 productions of less than 30 minutes and between 30 and 60 (82% and 41 productions) stand out, in the two large private networks, Antena3 (51.8% and 28 productions) and Tele5 (81% and 30 productions), those between 30 and 60 minutes or over 60 are the majority, in line with the general trend of covering all prime time with a single program, increasing their commercial profitability and avoiding the flight of viewers.

Format and time slot

The series is, without a doubt, the leading format in Spanish television comedy (80% and 144 productions). A long way behind is shortcom (11.6% and 21 productions), a particularly prolific format between 2005 and 2014 (80.9% and 17 productions). The TV movie (1.6% and three productions), the microseries²

2. Short episodic television programming narrative with a duration of less than 10 minutes.

(1.6% and three productions), the anthology (1.1% and two productions) and the miniseries (0.5% and one production) are minorities. Comedy in serial format (3.3% and six productions) has also not been very frequent. This format favors dramatic stories, hence the few comic serials have been characterized by the constant displacement from one genre to another. In fact, three of the six comic series are adaptations of telenovelas, a markedly dramatic genre. The serial and the shortcom are, in addition, the two formats that have allowed comedy to be located outside the limits of prime time, the preferred time slot for comic fiction (84.4% and 152 productions). While all the serials have been scheduled during the after-hours, shortcoms, a fragmented format with great programmatic flexibility, have been located, in addition to prime time, in the afternoon and access prime time slot.

Time period and time structure of the story

The comedy is mostly set in the contemporary (97.2% and 175 productions). The prominence of the present is also identified in the text, given that the repeated use of anachronisms is practically non-existent (1.1% and two productions). There is only one comic production located in the future (*Plutón BRB Nero*, La2, 2008-2009) and four in the past: two in the Civil War (*La banda de Pérez*, TVE1, 1997, and *Plaza de España*, TVE1, 2011), one in the sixties (*Arde Madrid*, Movistar+, 2018) and one in the eighties (*Los Quién*, Antena3, 2011).

Setting

In line with North American references, the Spanish comedy (64.4% and 116 productions) maintains the conventional theatrical staging and the spatial economy: exclusive and limited use of artificial scenographic spaces, mostly interior, with light saturation. This characteristic of the genre has limited the plots, almost exclusively, to the family, domestic or work environment, favoring the humor based on dialogue and the characters features more than the action. This model has also limited stylistic innovations, perpetuating the classic multi-camera style. However, without leaving the set, some comedies have offered a more natural setting thanks to the express creation of large scenarios that allow the camera to be moved in novel ways, as in *Ellas y el sexo débil* (Antena3, 2006) and *Cuestión de sexo* (Four, 2007-2009). In parallel, with the passage of time, a tendency is identified to abandon studio sets to shoot a greater number of scenes in outdoor locations. During the 1990s, only 16 productions combined set and exterior, while in the following decade 19 did so, and in the last decade, 29. The outdoor setting also maintains a close relationship with the episodes' length: 76.5% (49 productions) of the comedies that include natural settings have an average duration of more than 45 minutes. The budgetary increase implied by filming outdoors needs to be amortized optimizing profitability in prime time.

The 64 comedies that combine indoor and outdoor settings do so in different proportions. Most present real scenarios in a timely manner (84.3% and 54 productions) and, in those in which they are recurring, the rural setting stands out, as happens in *Querido maestro* (Tele5, 1997-98), shot in Villaviciosa de Odón and Boadilla del Monte (Madrid); *Doctor Mateo*, recorded in Lastres (Asturias), or *Olmos y Robles* (TVE1, 2015-2016), set in Ezcaray and other locations in Logroño. Due to its diversity of landscapes, *Compuesta y sin novio* (Antena3, 1994), shot in Benavente, Madrid, Marbella, Mallorca, Benidorm, Villajoyosa and Isla de la Toja, also stands out.

Protagonism and subgenres

The excessive lengthening of the episodes and the need to maintain the humorous rhythm has multiplied the number of plots and leading characters. This phenomenon explains, to a large extent, the progressive increase and the wide television representation of choral comedy in Spain between 1990 and 2018 (62.7% and 113 productions). In second position, at a great distance, we find comedies with individual protagonism (21.1% and 38 productions), and, finally, the couples of protagonists (16.1% and 29 productions), which include sentimental couples (15 productions) and comic duos (14 productions) (see figure 2).

During the 1990s, numerous productions continued to build on the charisma of an individual protagonist, a veteran figure, widely recognized by the audience, who determined the success of the production. However, at the end of the decade and the beginning of the 2000s, *7 vidas* and *Aquí no hay viva* started an evolution towards an increasingly choral protagonism. This type of prominence, in addition to helping to maintain the comic rhythm for more minutes, minimizes the risk of ending production due to the abandonment of a specific actor. Hence, it is the first option in all channels.

Choral protagonism

Choral comedies often spread the weight of the plot among all its characters, mixing female and male protagonists. However, these comedies include those in which, despite being choral, a male figure stands out (17 productions, compared to 12 led by a female figure). On the contrary, there is a greater number of choral comedies with exclusively female protagonists (nine productions) than male (one production).

The most abundant comic subgenre among the productions of choral protagonism has been the domestic comedy, or comedy centered on a biological or assembled family nucleus (42.4% and 48 productions). In second place is the workplace comedy (21.2% and 24 productions), followed by the palcom or comedy of friends (19.4% and 22 productions). The fourth position is for the neighborhood comedy (7.9%

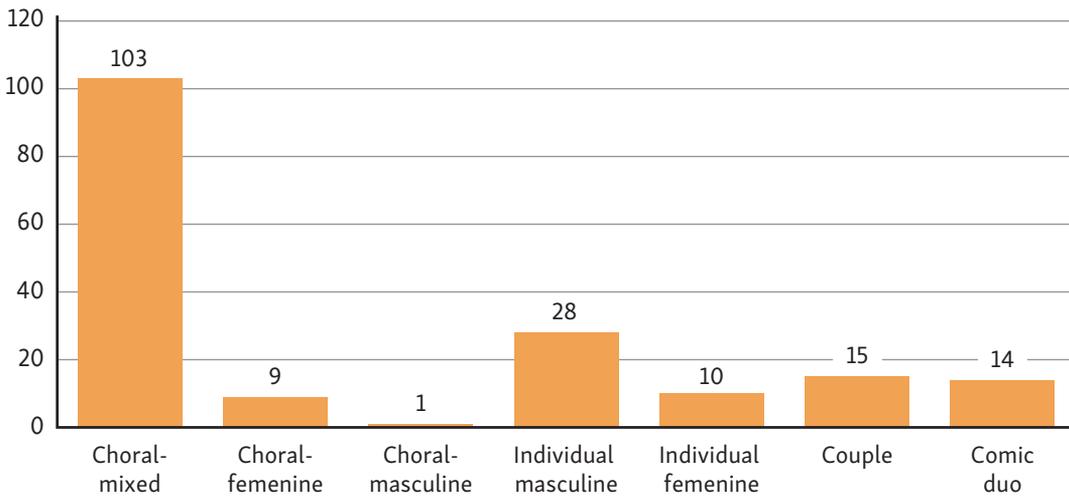


Figure 2. Comic protagonism (N)

Source: Own elaboration.

and nine productions) which, despite its enormous popularity thanks to *Aquí no hay hay viva*, and Tele5's *La que se avecina*, has constituted a secondary subgenre of Spanish television comedy. Finally, among the choral comedies, there is also the variety shortcoms (6.2% and seven productions), which combine various themes, and the romantic comedy (2.6% and three productions), also in shortcom format.

It is necessary to point out the heuristic nature of the proposed classification, conceived only to structure the analysis, since the different comic subgenres are not mutually exclusive. Thus, the classification indicates the subgenre with which each comedy shares the greatest number of defining traits, without preventing it from also sharing traits with other subgenres (for a general classification of productions according to subgenre, see figure 3).

Individual protagonism

The comedies that revolve around a single protagonist mix, in equal parts, the professional, family, and sentimental facet of said character. In these cases, the trigger for the plot is usually a drastic turn in the life of the main character: a change of profession, place of residence, emotional situation, etc.

As in choral protagonism, among the productions of individual protagonism stand out the comedies that revolve around a male figure (73.6% and 28 productions). In these cases, the main role of the protagonist is decisive for the whole story. His profession is revealed in the same title of the fiction, as it happens in *El sexólogo* (TVE1, 1994), *Señor alcalde* (Tele5, 1998) or *Jacinto Durante representante* (TVE1, 2000), or it is crucial for his characterization. In fact, in some cases, such as *Tercera planta*, *Inspector de hacienda* (TVE1, 1992), *Agente 700* (TVE1, 2001) or *Psicodriving* (Nitro, 2012-2013), is practically the only facet addressed.

Unlike the male comedy, the female comedy has been a minority and the characterization of its protagonists has not focused on their professional facet. Romantic or family plots become more relevant in these cases. Some protagonists do not even have a defined profession, such as Kety (*Kety no para*, TVE1, 1997) or Reme (*Hostal Royal Manzanares*). Teresa (*Para qué sirve un marido*, TVE2, 1997), Julia (*Maitena. Estados alterados*, LaSexta, 2008-2009), Lola (*Lalola*, Antena3, 2008-2009) and Lucía (*Ciega a citas*, Cuatro, 2014) do have a profession and this is an important part of their characterization. However, in all four cases, the love story takes on greater prominence. The only exception is *Paquita Salas* (Neox, 2016; Netflix, 2018-), whose protagonist mainly displays her work facet.

Protagonists couples

The comedy starring a sentimental couple, all heterosexual, is mostly registered mostly (66.6% and 10 productions) in the subgenre of romantic comedy or couplecom, which has not had great presence or popularity in Spanish programming.

In addition to sentimental couples, comedies can also be starred by another type of couple: comic duos. Among those, once again, the men stand out in number: ten male duos versus three female ones. Only one case of a comic duo with members of different sex is identified: *Apaga la luz* (TVE1, 2006), starring a mother and her son. Among female comic duos, the relationship between members tends to be justified by a kinship relationship (66.6% and two productions), while, among men, labor ties stand out (60% and six productions). Regardless of the protagonists' gender, all the comedies starring a comic duo are part of the comedy of opposites subgenre (14 productions), in which humor derives from the disparity between two radically different ways of conceiving the world. In most of them, in addition, there are traits of the buddy comedy, characterized by two opposite protagonists who must work together to subsist or fulfill a mission. Usually, they begin to collaborate with each other by force, although later they realize that, despite their differences, they form a good team.

Given the rise of choral protagonism, the comedy of opposites embodied in a protagonist couple has decreased decade after decade. However, the clash between profiles continues to be a major driver of conflict in many other subgenres.

Narrative structure and number of plots per episode

While the sitcom presents a cyclical structure in which, at the end of each episode, inexorably returns to the starting point, most of the Spanish comedies (53.3% and 96 productions) usually include, at least, one main plot of continuity that, in the end, ends up transforming the initial situation. The introduction of serialized plots increases the risk of causing a shift from the comic to the dramatic and of reducing the humor. However, their enormous power to build the audience's

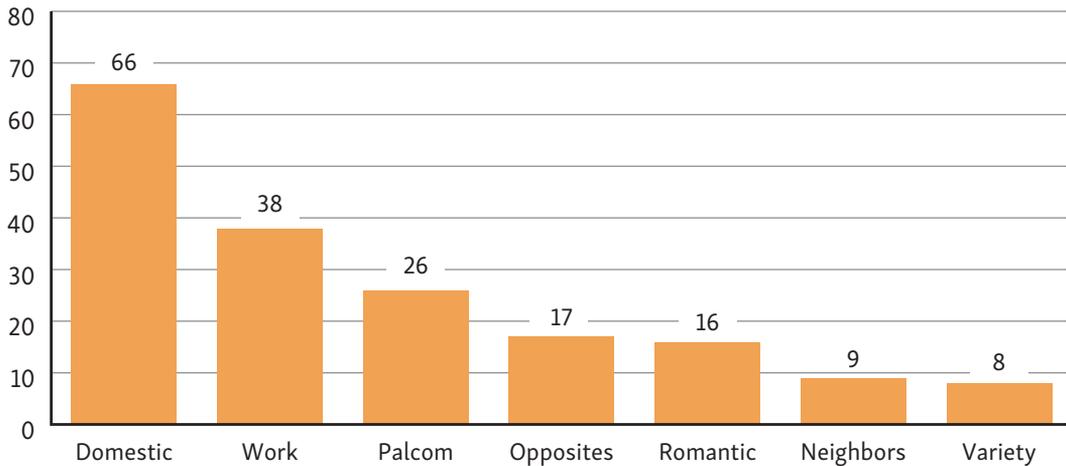


Figure 3. Comic subgenres of fiction (N)

Source: Own elaboration.

loyalty has made them an important ally of comedy in Spain. Hence, so many productions ranging from comedy to drama are identified, better cataloged as dramedies, a hybrid of genres that appears in Spain from the hand of a domestic comedy: *Médico de familia*.

Over the decades, the continuity plots have undergone a positive evolution and have increased their representation: 41.1% (28 productions) in the 1990s, 59.3% (38 productions) between 2000 and 2009, and 62.5% (30 productions) between 2010 and 2018. Exclusively episodic comedies, on the contrary, owe their reduced stay on air, mainly to shortcoms. Spanish comedy has been characterized by combining the traditional self-closing narrative with an open structure, thus allowing the attraction of the faithful and the occasional viewer, simultaneously.

The increase in the length of the episodes and the number of protagonists has also increased the number of plots per episode. While in the nineties they did not exceed three, as happens in the sitcom, during the 2000s, most of the comedies (73.4% and 47 productions) had between four and five plots per episode, data similar to that of the last decade (72.9% and 35 productions).

Stereotypical characters

In line with the sitcom, national comic stories are usually articulated around stereotypical characters (79.4% and 143 productions), i.e., plain and easily recognizable for the viewer. In the first decade of the 21st century, comedies starring stereotypical characters (87.5% and 56 productions) increased in relation to the previous period (77.9% and 53 productions). However, in the following decade they decreased again (62.5% and 30 productions). In any case, this type of character is the majority in all periods, as in all channels, formats, and subgenres. Exceptions

are mainly identified in dramatic comedies with three-dimensional characters, such as *Mujeres* (La2, 2006), or pure comedies where the objective is precisely to laugh at stereotypes and ridicule those who perpetuate them, as happens in *Vergüenza* (Movistar+ , 2017-).

The most stereotyped characterizations correspond to immigrant and homosexual characters (Gómez Morales, 2020), although a wide range of stereotyped roles and behaviors related to gender are also identified. For example, among women we can identify the stereotype of the man-eater (such as Amparo, from *A ver si llego*, Tele5, 2009), the old witch (Benigna, from *Juntas pero no revueltas*, TVE1, 1995-96) or the prostitute with a heart of gold (Sonsy, from *Hostal Royal Manzanares*), while the profile of the mature man who is still charming (such as Pablo, from *Señor alcalde* or Pedro, from *Ni contigo ni sin ti*, TVE1, 1998) stands out among the male sex or the adult man who continues to behave like a teenager (Juan Luis, from *Todos los hombres son iguales*, Tele5, 1996-98). Other fertile grounds for the stereotype are political ideologies (for example, the lazy and cowardly communist or the endearing Francoist), the social class (the posh or the exurbanite), or the geographical origin (such as the Catalan with a strong accent or the Andalusian *salao*).

Original idea

Only 16.6% (30 productions) of the comedies released between 1990 and 2018 are adaptations, among which foreign television fictions (53.3% and 16 productions) stand out, half of which are American. Of this small group, the majority have not enjoyed the acceptance of the audience. The most faithful adaptations to its original, such *Matrimonio con hijos* (Cuatro, 2006- 2007), *Las chicas de oro* (TVE1, 2010) o *Cheers* (Tele5, 2011-2012) –remakes of *Married with children* (Fox, 1987-1997), *The Golden Girls* (NBC, 1985-1992) and *Cheers* (NBC, 1982-1993), respectively–, failed to make it through the first season due to cultural differences. On the contrary, productions such as *Querido maestro*, *Doctor Mateo* or *Camera Café* (Tele5, 2005-2009), the Spanish versions of *Caro maestro* (Canale 5, 1996-1997), *Doc Martin* (ITV, 2004-2019) and *Caméra Café* (M6, 2001-2004), enjoyed a trajectory equal to or greater than that of their originals, like in the case of *Querido maestro*.

From time to time, the narrative codes of cinema (six productions), comics (four productions), literature (two productions), webseries (one production) and advertising spots (one production) have also been adapted to the aesthetic and narratives television demands. Apart from the original format, the adaptations have been practically monopolized by the three large general-interest channels (76.6% and 23 productions), and have experienced a sustained decrease decade after decade: 14 productions in the 1990s, 11 in the 2000s and five in the last decade.

Live and prerecorded laughter

Despite being one of the most characteristic elements of North American comedy, the explicit or supposed presence of an off choral narrator has not been a defining element of Spanish comedy (27.2% and 49 productions). The nineties presented the highest number of comic releases with live or prerecorded laughs (42.8% and 21 productions). Since then, its use has been declining: 18 productions between 2000 and 2009 and ten between 2010 and 2018. As a sign of fidelity, laughter has been included in five of the eight American sitcoms adaptations, but no direct relationship is identified between the inclusion of laughter and the traditional duration of the sitcom. On the contrary, the insertion of laughter does stand out in relation to two other defining elements of the sitcom: recording entirely in the studio (89.7% and 44 productions) and a strictly self-conclusive structure (77.5% and 38 productions).

A high number of fictions with live or prerecorded laughs did not exceed the first season (63.2% and 31 productions), although this resource is identified in some of the most outstanding comedies in Spain, such as *Farmacia de Guardia*, *A las once en casa* (TVE1, 1998-1999), *7 vidas* or *Aída*. In general terms, prerecorded laughs (79.5% and 39 productions) have been more frequent than live ones, which are only seen in ten productions (20.4%), among which those starring Lina Morgan stand out.

Conclusions

From 1995, Spanish television fiction underwent a creative revolution and comedy began to develop its own identity based on a sui generis adaptation of the sitcom. This format has not enjoyed the same success in Spain as in the United States and, therefore, in its local adaptation, it has undergone multiple transformations. In any case, the Spanish television comedy retains some defining features of the North American canonical referent. Mainly, the stereotypical, widely known characters, the interior settings familiar to the viewer (home, workplace, bar, etc.), and the setting in the present. All of them intended to facilitate the process of identification or projection between the audience and the story.

On the contrary, the adaptation of the Spanish television comedy to the sitcom has obviated three defining elements of the original format: 1) the duration, between 22 and 24 minutes, 2) recording with a live audience or the subsequent introduction of prerecorded laughs, and 3) the cyclical and exclusively self-contained structure. On the other hand, the invasive system of advertising insertion, which never respects the sitcom's typical narrative rhythm, has forced it to eliminate the classic three-act structure, preceded by a teaser and finished off with a tag.

The usual politics of the networks to occupy all prime time with a single content has systematically lengthened the extension of television productions, including

comedy. In parallel, and although it is usually done mostly in studios, shooting does not normally include live audiences. But surely, the renunciation of the cyclical and exclusively self-conclusive structure is the qualitative trait that most distances Spanish television comedy from the classic sitcom. The absence of the self-concluding cyclical structure has meant the introduction of new elements in the process of constructing an identity typical of Spanish comedy: 1) serial formulas and continuity plots, 2) numerous choral casts, which allow a greater number of plots per episode, and 3) the generic hybridization, mainly between comedy and drama, in response to changes in the habits and preferences of Spanish audiences television consumption³⁴.

After its attempts to faithfully reproduce, although without success, the sitcom format (1990-1994), the Spanish comedy integrated other traditions, such as *Landismo* (movies that mixed together comedy and soft erotism) and *el cine de destape* (movies with a strong erotic content), through its most representative stars (Alfredo Landa and Mariano Ozores). However, in the late 1990s it became clear that the erotic humor of these traditions was already completely out of date. On the other hand, the *costumbrismo* derived from the comic sketch has not only characterized very popular comedies of the nineties, such as *Hostal Royal Manzanares*, but has maintained its television trajectory and validity. Currently, we can still identify it in successful productions such as *Allí abajo* (Antena3, 2015-2019), although with a clearly contemporary treatment.

Starting in the 1990s and given the progressive increase in competitiveness in the Spanish television system, placing the bets on themes geared towards attracting majority audiences became the norm. This fact limited the narrative innovation, imposing the repetition of the success formula: domestic comedies characterized by light humor, *costumbrismo*, intergenerational plots, happy endings with morals and high doses of sentimentality.

In the mid-2000s, the appearance of Cuatro and LaSexta meant a renewal for the genre. From the beginning, both channels decided to focus on specific and alternative market niches to those of the competition, especially among young urban audiences. This fact led to the development of shortcoms, as well as the presentation of a more reflective and self-conscious humor, riddled with constant references to the television landscape. However, the most notorious

3. In addition to hybridization with drama, comedy has been mixed with other genres, such as science fiction, for example, in *El inquilino* (Antena3, 2004) or *Supercharly* (Tele5, 2010), as well as detective fiction, in *Olmos y Robles* or *Sabuesos* (TVE1, 2018).

renewal movement would come later, thanks to pay TV channels that, without the requirement of a massive audience, have been able to present more risky and experimental proposals.

In the last decade, the Spanish television market has diversified, and the fiction industry has strengthened. However, the comedy has not experienced its best economic moment: its presence on the programming has decreased markedly and few productions have become true audience successes. On the contrary, in narrative terms, it has undergone a significant evolution. Following the renewal movement of Anglo-Saxon comedy (Mills, 2004; Bonaut Iriarte & Grandío Pérez, 2009; Savorelli, 2010; Nardi, 2017), started in the 2000s and led by HBO and the BBC, Spanish television comedy also begins to question the conventions of the genre and starts a turn towards the hybridization between fiction and documentary style.

The search for realism and spontaneity is clear, for example, in the progressive abandonment of the set and multi-camera shooting, which has given way to a stylistic innovation: the exteriors have gained ground and, little by little, a more cinematographic language prevails. Consequently, the introduction of prerecorded or live laughs, as the results indicate, also continues to decline, as do the adaptations. The stereotypical characters, although continue to be the majority, have also decreased, allowing an increasingly complex and three-dimensional role, as happens in *Arde Madrid* or *El fin de la comedia*. This latest comedy, like *Qué vida más triste* (LaSexta, 2008-2010), *Qué fue de Jorge Sanz* (Canal+, 2010-2017) and *Mira lo que ha hace* (Movistar+, 2018-), mixes reality and fiction to the extent that its protagonist plays himself. In the four productions, the key element in the construction of humor is that their protagonists explain experiences of their personal and private lives in front of the camera, always from a self-satirical perspective and as a self-reflection exercise, as we have already seen in *The Larry Sanders Show* (HBO, 1992-1998), *Curb your enthusiasm* (HBO, 2000-) or *Louie* (FX, 2010-2015). Therefore, it can be said that, despite the distancing from the classic sitcom, the Anglo-Saxon television comedy continues to exert an important influence on Spanish television comedy.

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