

Mediático is delighted to present an entry by contributing editor [Paul Julian Smith](#), Distinguished Professor, PhD Program in Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Languages and Literatures at the Graduate Center, City University of New York.

It would seem to be business as usual for Spanish television drama. Two weeks ago Globomedia, the best known independent producer, launched a new series which exemplified all of the characteristics that make the Spanish audiovisual ecology so unique. [Bienvenidos al Lolita](#) (Globomedia/Antena 3) is an ensemble dramedy with each weekly episode sprawling over one and half hours of Spanish prime time (it begins at 10.30). Its premiere on 7th January attracted an audience of 3.5 million and share of 18.4%, the highest of the night. The premise, the relaunch of a previously closed cabaret in Madrid, facilitates one of those huge casts (from irritating children to grumpy grandmas) typical in Spain: by my count some twenty people sit down to dinner before putting on their show. Even this song and dance element, relatively rare, is familiar. Antena 3's excellent [Vive cantando](#) (whose Tuesday slot *Lolita* took over) focused, once more, on the renovation of a Madrid nightclub, but in that case within a more credible working class milieu.

Lolita (the title refers to the fictional locale, not Nabokov) makes some gestures towards modernity. There are frequent references to Spain's economic crisis (the justification for characters' cohabitation in an empty theatre) and initially there is tension between the strait-laced provincial property owner and metropolitan showbiz folk). But by the second episode this conflict is already resolved as the sober businessman bonds with an extravagant transgender performer. As [chicadelatele](#), the best blogger on Spanish TV, noted, *Lolita* breaks no new ground. Indeed, she writes, even the new series unaccustomed speed of exposition (characters' backstories are told in voice over and they are identified by captions on screen) testifies only to the ferocious competition between local series in prime time which aim to hook viewers from the word go.

Elsewhere in the schedule, however, something exceptional is happening. [El tiempo entre](#)

costuras (Boomerang/Antena 3) is a big budget historical drama about a seamstress-cum-spy. Although broadcast by Antena 3, the same free to air national network as *Lolita's*, it is made by Boomerang, an independent production company less known but more versatile than Globomedia. *El tiempo's* run of eleven weekly glamorous episodes, also some ninety minutes long, comes to an end tomorrow (20 January 2014). Initially a period piece may not seem so new. Antena 3's schedule is itself awash with costume drama with daily serials *Amar es para siempre* and *El secreto de Puente Viejo* occupying some three hours each afternoon in the post-lunch 'sobremesa' slot. In their quest for event programming, however, so alien to the daily rhythm of soap and telenovela, Antena 3 kept their prestige serial under wrap for almost twelve months, waiting for the right date and building anticipation (star Adriana Ugarte, my co-juror at San Sebastián last year, was already engaged in promotion for the series at that festival). The broadcaster was rewarded with an extraordinary rating, averaging five million, and a 25.3% share over the series.

Moreover, Antena 3 exploited its multichannel digital arsenal (laSexta, Nova, Nitro, and laSexta3) relentlessly. On the main channel, news bulletins announced that travel bookings to Morocco had boomed since early episodes set in that country had been aired: viewers wanted to follow the steps (or stitches) of character Sira. In this the week before the climax, interviews with the cast and best selling author María Dueñas were ubiquitous. Even cooking and game shows scheduled special episodes related to the 30s and 40s set drama. Sister channel Nova will air a marathon of all ten episodes before the first screening of the final episode on Antena 3. This unique coordinated programming was justified by a spokeswoman in *El País* because of the series' status as an 'event' in Spanish fiction production.

The key innovation (and attraction) of *El tiempo entre costuras* is that it is quite literally a costume drama. Initially alone and unaided, the protagonist comes to run the most fashionable dressmaking studio in post-war Madrid, where she has moved from a period in Morocco. Much action in later episodes takes place in Lisbon, where Sira seduces a

businessman in league with the Nazis. Her true love, however, is a freedom fighter whom she pretends to disdain in order to protect his life. But more frequent and dramatic scenes show the normally self-controlled Sira hugging and sobbing with a female English friend ('¡El amor duele, darling!'). As Sira sacrifices her relationships with her lover and long lost father to her somewhat mysterious espionage mission (at one point carrying microfilm wrapped around an orchid on her hat), it would appear that the series is simply a remake of the women's movie: she is a Mildred Pierce who has swapped a baking dish for a sewing machine. The theme of the absent father and uncertain paternity seems likewise taken straight from a Latin American telenovela, even though that genre is no longer successful in Spain.

However, three elements move *El tiempo* on to a different level. The first is the extraordinary care given to mise en scene. Every shot is perfectly composed and curated, from (of course) the parade of exquisite costumes to the luxurious authentic locations (Lisbon never looked better). Even when Sira is forced to waylay a chicken truck for a secret mission (her pencil skirt means she needs to be carried on board in the driver's arms) she drapes her hair in a cerise chiffon scarf. But given the fact that the narrative focuses precisely on fashion as women's work and feminine guiles (Nazi ladies also come into Sira's orbit drawn by her unparalleled skill with a needle), the extravagant display of wardrobe, apparently incongruous in the context of war-torn Europe, is thematized and does not feel superfluous to the plot.

A second related element after the sumptuous look is the performance by star Adriana Ugarte, who is perfectly (and differently) coiffed and attired in each scene. As we have seen, Spanish series are normally ensemble by nature. It is thus highly unusual that one actor should carry a fiction on her shoulders. And this is one that is for the most part noticeably devoid of cute infants and cantakerous oldsters. Moreover Ugarte, who is in almost every shot, gives a highly controlled performance that could not be further from the melodramatics of classic Hollywood or modern telenovelas. She brings a sobriety and

intensity to a potentially soapy plot whose distinction is intensified by the remarkably leisurely pace of a narrative that seems (like Sira herself) somehow suspended in time.

This brings us to the final characteristic of the show: its relation to history. I was surprised, dropping in to episodes over recent weeks, how difficult it is to establish the date at which the action takes place. The grand narrative of the Civil War and Nazism is glimpsed through costume, women's work (which comes down to the same thing here), and female psychology, both individual and collective (Sira gathers a crowd of faithful followers at her studio). In spite of this indirect engagement with historical context, then, *El tiempo entre costuras* could be read as a revival of Spain's mini-series of the 1970s and 80s, which were invariably literary adaptations of the classics. Like, say, TVE's *Fortunata y Jacinta*, *El tiempo* boasts unusually high production values, which are currently inaccessible to Spanish directors in feature film, whose budgets have been cut with the crisis. The ample budget transforms everyday television into an aesthetic object offering intense visual pleasure. But where the classic serials of the Transition served to educate Spaniards in the new responsibilities of democracy, the moral of *El tiempo* is more diffuse and private, focusing as it does on female self-realisation, both emotional and economic.

Unlike the 'series clásicas' (still available on TVE's [website](#)), moreover, the figure of the author (say, Galdós) is here replaced by a focus on the star as auteur (the modern novelist Dueñas cannot aspire to the status of the 19th century master). Ugarte, an unusually thoughtful figure (she studied philosophy at the Complutense and carefully guards her public image), is little known abroad and has had a mixed trajectory in film. Yet Spanish *Glamour* magazine ran a cover picture of her with the single caption: 'La estrella'. Ugarte's image, like that of her character, suggests an independence and self-confidence that does not preclude, however, an expression of the emotion required in the historical romance genre. *El tiempo* thus bids for a quality demographic, which, unlike the family audience still sought by most Spanish series, coincides with the tastes of adult, childless, and professional women.

An internet campaign is underway for Dueñas to produce a sequel to the novel, as yet unwritten. As five million viewers wait for the last episode of the current run, it remains to be seen if a second series will come in the fullness of time to disrupt business as usual on the crowded fiction schedules of Spanish TV. Meanwhile the fact that this last episode will be shown tomorrow at a glamorous red carpet premiere attended by Ugarte and her cast in the Cines Callao on Madrid's Gran Vía is proof enough that television fiction has taken over from feature film as the source of Spain's most spectacular national narrative.

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