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Spanish-Portuguese Serial Fiction as a Politainment Tool: Representations of Politics on Iberian Television

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Abstract
This article deals with recent Spanish and Portuguese political television series. Within this sub-genre, it is pertinent to consider the symbolic construction of politics, as well as the differences caused by each series' geographical adscription. Six Spanish productions have been selected—*Isabel* (Isabella the Catholic), *Carlos Rey Emperador* (Charles the Emperor King), *La Embajada* (The Embassy), *Crematorio* (Crematorium), *Vamos Juan/Venga Juan* (Come on, Juan/Let's go Juan), and *El Partido* (The Party)—along with three Portuguese productions—*A Rainha e a Bastarda* (The Queen and the Bastard), *Teorias da Conspiração* (Conspiracy Theories), and *Os Boys* (The Boys). The narrative of these audio-visual stories has been examined utilising qualitative content analysis, looking at the plotlines and characters involved. The type of characterisation of politics has been identified by means of the deconstruction of the main characters. The conclusion is that the evaluation is eminently negative, although differential frameworks are present, depending, in particular, on the fiction's genre, either historical drama, drama-thriller, or comedy.

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Political Communication in Times of Spectacularisation: Digital Narratives, Engagement, and Politainment" edited by Salvador Gómez-García (Complutense University of Madrid), Rocío Zamora (University of Murcia), and Salomé Berrocal (University of Valladolid).

1. Introduction

This work arose from the conviction that TV fiction has a double meaning: On the one hand, it is a text which reflects the concerns, prejudices, and hegemonic desires of its production context; on the other, it is a mirror in which viewers can both see and model themselves. It is thus more than a mere form of entertainment, and its ideological sense is beyond all doubt (Rosenstone, 2013, p. 72).

Secondly, the article considers continuities between Spanish and Portuguese television fiction, understanding that there are synergies between the two that have hardly been touched on by academia. Cultural and geographical proximity are key elements in understanding the ties between viewers and the audio-visual background. In this sense, the transference of fiction content from Spain to Portugal is noteworthy, whether as original products or through adaptations. Coproductions have recently given rise to several fiction products of double nationality.

Thirdly, the object of this study has figured in a sub-genre which has enjoyed relative growth, although its presence is still little more than testimonial: TV series dealing with politics. Though few in number, television fiction series have been identified in which politics occupies the centre of the narrative; it is the stage upon which the characters take their decisions and resolve their conflicts. This study concerns itself with the representations of politics and politicians proffered by these productions.

It strives to identify the narrative, social and psychological characteristics of the central characters in these stories, as well as the values related to the staging and practice of politics.

2. Research and Dominant Frameworks in Political Fiction

When talking of the creation of imaginary political worlds, the press has traditionally been considered the hegemonic medium. Consumption of the press is understood not only as a means of information and development but even as an unconventional way of participating in politics. The phenomenon of public opinion appears linked to the medium, not only in its genesis but in its development (Lippman, 1997; Tarde, 1989). However, this function can also be performed by other media and, more particularly, by the formats of TV fiction.

When analysing the media's influence on public opinion and political participation, the classical distinction between information and entertainment is not always operative (Mutz, 2001). It is worth noting how some research has highlighted the role of TV fiction in the political culture and education of the population, making sense of the concept of politainment.

Politainment is the conversion of politics into entertainment by turning it into a show business spectacle and personalizing it (Berrocal-Gonzalo, 2017). The digital society has imposed new forms of communication between politicians and citizens wherein emotions and anecdotes take precedence (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2022). In this setting, politics-themed TV series—where such elements come together—are a good example of the concept. Fiction, through its storylines and characters, makes a connection between viewers and reality, which allows fiction formats to act as a diffusor of values (Tous-Rovirosa et al., 2013, p. 71). It reproduces narrative conflicts similar to those occurring in the real world (Pantoja, 2015), focusing on issues that concern the population and transmitting an idea—positive and/or negative—of how power is wielded (Rodríguez & Padilla, 2018).

Thus, some of the classic contributions in communication theory have served as a methodological and theoretical framework in clarifying the role of TV fiction in political communication processes. Research in this area has been inspired by concepts ranging from agenda setting (Holbrook & Hill, 2005) to framing (Aitaki, 2018) or priming (Holbert et al., 2003). However, such studies have focused attention on the processes for receiving the message.

The relationship between fiction and politics has also been approached from the point of view of the message and its semantics. Here there have been interesting attempts to establish types of fiction, allowing for progress with analysis and in organising this vast and diverse area of output. Contributions have come from the most all-encompassing approaches down to the most focused and monographic contributions. The former includes work such as that of Eilders and Nitsch (2015), covering a sample of 200 productions, which serve as references in the field. They point out how indicators such as political intensity and the degree of realism are relevant when evaluating the representation of politics in fiction. Other contributions, employing narrative and scriptwriting focuses, look more at technical questions, such as plot development, the construction of characters, or how the story is resolved, as elements which stress the viewers' emotional connection as well as the story's credibility (Cabeza, 2000; Sánchez-Escalonilla, 2013).

Also worthy of mention are the monographic studies which highlight the effect fiction can have on the behaviour and political attitudes of the population. Watching some of these stories may have a kind of illustrative role, providing interpretive keys for a complex reality (Porto, 2005, p. 355). Similarly, they may also work as a complementary source in the forming of political attitudes (Holbrook & Hill, 2005). Their clear nature as entertainment, in that they are tools of politainment, turns them into adequate texts for the reflection of matters of public interest with which the viewers may come to have an emotional attachment. They may serve to increase awareness of and interest in some of these collective matters, reinforcing an attitude of commitment to the public sphere (Nærland, 2020). Also well documented is their capacity to feed social representations and behavioural or relational models, as highlighted by research from the framework of cultivation theory (Saito, 2007) or even from feminist theory (Van Bauwel, 2018). Finally, they may also serve to reinforce the position of the group in power and to discredit the opposition, especially in situations in which democratic systems are not completely institutionalised (Ribke, 2021).

Though intended as entertainment, recent television fiction has shown interest in exploring politics as a subject. Some emblematic productions serve as good examples of the diversity with which fiction has focused on politics. Politics has been presented in a positive and mythical light in dramas such as *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999–2006). This has been related to concepts such as professionalism, commitment, and qualification. In Europe, *Borgen* (DR1, 2010–) or *The Crown* (Netflix, 2016–), for example, grant protagonism to female figures and highlight the difficulty of balancing public and private life.

Secondly, the genre of drama sometimes frameworks politics as the stage for power struggles, where ethical norms are minimalised. Such proposals concentrate, especially, on politicians who triumph when employing their skills as pragmatic, Machiavellian villains. In this sense, *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013–2018) is one of the harshest formulations, apart from being one of the series of reference in the political sub-genre. Other less popular examples, such as the French *Baron Noir* (Canal +, 2016–) or *Marseille* (Netflix, 2016–), also tend towards the same forms of representation, confirming the idea that this perspective has a mythical and supra-cultural sense.

Thirdly, politics is susceptible to a more amusing focus through the genre of comedy, biting opinion, and satire. This presents a critical perspective and/or assumes a reality accepted via four elements: attack, opinion, playfulness, and humour (Gray et al., 2009). These formats utilise laughter as a weapon to pour scorn on a subject and create fun, contempt, ridicule, or indignation towards it (Abrams, 1999). The focus of the plot is usually incompetence (HBO's *Veep*, 2012–) or bureaucracy (Filmin's *Parliament*, 2020–).

Other focuses are possible. Politics has also been approached using issues or matters of public interest. In this sense, stories about terrorism are among the most common. *Designated Survivor* (Netflix, 2016–), *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–2020), or *La Unidad* (Movistar+, 2020–) present Islamic terrorism as a danger and point to law enforcement and political reactions. Particular mention should be made of some fiction narratives that, from the sub-genres of thrillers or science fiction, and using a dystopic or futuristic perspective, set out surprising or creative formulas of social organisation far from the norms of contemporary politics. Offerings such as *The Plot Against America* (HBO, 2020–), in which the story reinvents a North American past of dictatorship and the persecution of the Jews, or *A Handmaid's Tale* (MGM, 2017–), portraying a radical totalitarian future, are examples of this.

3. Political Fiction in Spain and Portugal

Politics as a subject has an unequal presence in Spanish and Portuguese fiction productions. Its absence was glaring for decades. Early television was born in both cases as a medium tightly controlled by the political powers, as is characteristic of dictatorial systems. Until well into the 1970s, the scarce domestic production adopted an eminently comical and trivialising approach (Diego et al., 2018; Palacio, 2012).

Francoist television served as a window to consumption, encouraging a desire to have and to purchase, along with political acquiescence (Callejo, 1995). The few domestic productions of the time (1956–1975) adopted an eminently trivial approach dominated by stories of romance and comedies. In later years, the creators of television fiction took advantage of these products to encourage values compatible with the coming democracy, though they did so subtly to avoid pressure from the censors (Chicharro-Merayo, 2018; Chicharro-Merayo & Gil-Gascón, 2022). In Portugal, RTP1 was the only television channel during the dictatorship (1933–1974), controlled by the political commissars running the news and programming directorates. It was "pastoral" television (Cintra Torres, 2011) tasked with fulfilling the regime's vision for the masses: educate, distract, and inform (but not too much). The first wave of renewal of the fiction genre occurred in 1969 when the dictator Marcelo Caetano succeeded the dictator António de Oliveira Salazar, and a programme generated a new audience phenomenon. *Zip Zip* was a live humorous talk show that commented on current affairs in a light-hearted way and became the symbol of a "small communicational revolution" (Cintra Torres, 2011). It was the first time the television audience escaped ideological indoctrination based on rigid doctrinal, aesthetic, and moral standards poured into literary and musical culture programmes that "put you to sleep" (Carvalheiro, 2018, p. 30).

In the 1980s, the consolidation of democracy in Spain went hand-in-hand with the production of stories concerning social matters (*Anillos de Oro* [Rings of Gold], TVE1, 1983–; *Turno de Oficio* [Public Defender], TVE2, 1986–; *Brigada Central* [Central Squad], TVE1, 1989–1990), ignoring their political dimension. Some formats were emerging in Portugal with a certain political slant. An example is the television play *A Senhora Ministra* (Madam Minister), about the political–sentimental lives of politicians and their wives towards the end of the constitutional monarchy. Broadcast in 1982, it inspired a sitcom of the same title, which parodied a minister whose chief aim was to do as little as possible. Although the subject matter was quite weak, this comical and satirical angle reinforced the stereotype of the lazy and deceitful political hack, though treating him relatively gently.

The 1990s would see the arrival of private and regional television channels. In Spain, this dynamic would lead to a boom in domestic fiction production. The most emblematic Spanish productions of the time avoided the "political question," turning to personal and professional stories more suited to all publics (*Farmacia de Guardia* [Duty Pharmacy], A3, 1991–1995; *Médico de Familia* [Family Doctor], Telecinco, 1995–1999; *Compañeros* [Pals], A3, 1998–2002; *Periodistas* [Journalists], Telecinco, 1998–2002). Portuguese production still gave pride of place to "moments, episodes and characters that personify the collective memory and national social imaginary" (Duff Burnay & Sardica, 2014, p. 15). An example is *Ballet Rose* (RTP1, 1998) which denounced the paedophile scandal, which involved several figures of the regime during the Estado Novo.

In the 21st century, politics assumed a moderate presence in fiction formats. A few Spanish sitcoms included some mentions of politics in their dialogues (*7 Vidas* [7 Lives], Telecinco, 1999–2006; *Aquí No Hay Quién Viva* [Who Could Live Here?], A3, 2003–2006; *Aida*, Telecinco, 2005–2014). Politics was explored as a central narrative axis in the comedy genre without gaining large audience shares (*Señor Alcalde* [Mr Mayor], Telecinco, 1998–; *Moncloa ¿Dígame?* [Moncloa, Hello?]; Telecinco, 2001–; *Plaza de España*, TVE 1, 2011–). In both countries, there was a proliferation of historical fiction productions evoking different ephemerides from the republican period (*La Señora* [The Lady], TVE, 2008–2010; *14 de Abril. La República* [April 14th. The Republic], TVE1, 2011–2019; *Noite Sangrenta* [Night of Blood], RTP, 2010–), the Civil War, and, even more so, the post-war—*Raia dos Medos* (Fear Alley, RTP, 2000–), *Amar en Tiempos Revueltos*

(Loving in Troubled Times, TVE1, 2005–2012), or *Amar es Para Siempre* (Love is Forever, A3, 2012–) are a few examples. *Cuéntame Cómo Pasó* (Remember When, TVE1, 2001–) and its Portuguese adaptation *Conta-me Como Foi* (RTP, 2007–2019) explored contemporary stories, turning to politics more as a contextual element than as the dramatic core.

From 2015 on, the emergence of streaming platforms, as well as new channels, has made for an increasingly complex televisual ecosystem. The Iberian audiovisual industries are integrated as producers for the platforms. At the same time, there is more cooperation through coproductions between Portuguese and Spanish public television, chiefly with TVG, the regional channel in Galicia.

In this context, politics is more clearly integrated into fiction, which serves as an expression of the social imaginary. An analysis of the most representative contemporary Spanish and Portuguese political fiction offers a singular outline of a shared perception of politics and politicians. Fictional televisual representations shed light on the role of the media in moulding political consciousness (Kaklamanidou & Tally, 2017). Analysis of the Portuguese and Spanish cases shows that new attitudes towards politics, resulting from a more cosmopolitan experience, continue to be anchored in persistent historical representations in the collective imagination of both countries. At the same time, as this work reveals, there is a creative exploration of sub-genres within political entertainment television. As is to be argued, this "cultural proximity" (Straubhaar, 1991) is manifest in the semantic and narrative continuities set out below.

4. Methodology and Corpus of Analysis

This article presents the results of a comparative study between nine series dealing with politics, recently produced in Spain and Portugal. The research looks at the keys to the representation of politics in recent domestically produced fiction. The media systems of both countries can be termed as polarised pluralism, characterised by deep social and political divisions, difficulty in achieving consensus, high degrees of apathy, non-participation in politics, and occasional legitimacy crises (Sartori, 2005). As regards the media, its conditioning by the market and political powers is worthy of mention, as well as its limited professional independence (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Thus, this article is underpinned by two main research questions:

RQ1: What are the keys to the representation of politics and politicians in these fiction products? Are the focuses and axes of representation synchronised or diverse?

RQ2: How are the characters on the political stage constructed? What are their principal features? What assessment does the series make of them?

The primary hypotheses are the following:

H1: The representation of politicians and politics is conditioned by the fiction genre. The fiction genre is a kind of frame which serves to ascribe meaning to politics.

H2: There are certain features which serve as commonplaces in the characters related to politics, contributing to the institutionalisation of a stereotype of politicians.

H3: Certain elements can be identified which serve to lend a positive/negative meaning to the character on the political stage (the character's motivation, development and ends, the relationship between public and private dimensions).

The corpus of analysis is made up of the few domestically produced fiction shows, which, broadcast from 2012 on, place politics at centre stage: six Spanish and three Portuguese (Table 1). The subject is approached from different genres—historical drama, drama-thriller, and comedy. The productions have been transmitted via diverse channels: open broadcast public/private channels (TVE1, Tele 5, RTP), online channels (Flooxer), and pay-per-view (TNT, HBO).

The unit of analysis is the lead character, a figure that is to be deconstructed in line with an analysis file containing over 20 fields relative to the character's psychological and social, private and public dimensions, as well as their narrative and semantic roles.

The methodology utilised follows the norms of qualitative content analysis, as well as the emergent designs typical of grounded theory (Andréu et al., 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). There has also been a careful review and an interpretive reading of the corpus striving to identify the central axes or principal thematic levels of a text. This analysis has allowed the authors to establish categories from the content by virtue of inductive logic, seeking patterns and recurrences (Andréu, 2000; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5. Analysis

5.1. Frameworks Proposed by the Series

The genre norms that shape a fiction series serve to define the focus or framework within which politics and politicians are represented (Table 2). In this sense, historical fiction favours a nostalgic and idealistic vision, as well as a positive outline of the activity and its protagonists. Dramas in a thriller format turn to the figure of the politician as someone who moves in a world of power, as a narrative resource capable of generating uncertainty and intrigue, shattering expectations and articulating stories of corruption, betrayal, and disloyalty, thus being of great utility in creating narrative tension. Comedy, with

Table 1. Data on the series analysed.

Title	Country	Genre/sub-genre	TV channel	Year of broadcast	No. of seasons/episodes
Isabel	Spain	Drama/historical fiction	TVE1	2012–2014	3 seasons 13 + 13 + 13 episodes
Carlos Rey Emperador	Spain	Drama/historical fiction	TVE1	2015–2016	1 season 17 episodes
A Rainha e a Bastarda	Portugal	Drama/historical fiction	RTP	2022	1 season 8 episodes
Crematorio	Spain	Drama/thriller	Canal +	2011	1 season 8 episodes
La Embajada	Spain	Drama/thriller	Tele 5	2016	1 season 11 episodes
Teorias da Conspiração	Portugal	Drama/thriller	RTP	2019	1 season 18 episodes
Vamos Juan	Spain	Comedy	TNT	2020	1 season 7 episodes
Venga Juan			HBO	2021	1 season 8 episodes
Os Boys	Portugal	Comedy	RTP	2016	1 season 13 episodes
El Partido	Spain	Comedy	Flooxer	2017	2 seasons 6 + 7 episodes

its humorous outlook, is the best genre for a critical vision, especially as regards current events.

As is shown in the next sections, the genre or framework utilised by a fiction series is the frame necessary to construct representations and characters that offer different readings of politics.

5.1.1. Historical Drama or Politics as a Heroic Deed

The genre of historical fiction is especially apt for adding an epic dimension to a story. In this way, the choice of characters, historical period, and the events to be related usually corresponds to a wish to recreate scenes and characters known to the general public as they figure in brilliant episodes from history.

This is the sense of three of the fiction series chosen. *A Rainha e a Bastarda* evokes the late Middle Ages through the figure of King Dionis, whilst *Isabel* and *Carlos Rey Emperador* recreate modern Spanish history (the

reigns of Isabel la Católica and Carlos V). These stages, chronologically contiguous, not only present glorious historical moments in the two countries, but their protagonists are major figures in the construction of Spanish and Portuguese national identities and nation-states.

From these narrative and semantic keys, the three characters analysed are represented in largely positive terms. Trained in politics, they work as professionals, they develop and grow, and they triumph in the activity. Among their common characteristics, we find effort, merit, decisiveness, problem-solving ability, proactivity, ambition, and even obsession when pursuing their objectives, though the definition of the characters is nuanced, especially due to their gender.

In the case of the Portuguese main character, King Dionis, his artistic interests in music and poetry grant him a special sensitivity, as well as a superlative education. Such characteristics are coherent with the definition of a good manager who exercises transactional leadership,

Table 2. Genre/framework for representing politics and its protagonists.

Politics in an epic/heroic key Positive assessment Historical drama	Politics as disloyal Negative assessment Drama-thriller	Politics from an amused/critical viewpoint Negative assessment Comedy
Isabel	*Crematorio*	*Vamos Juan/Venga Juan*
Carlos Rey Emperador	*La Embajada*	*Os Boys*
A Rainha e a Bastarda	*Teorias da Conspiração*	*El Partido*

using positive and negative reinforcement (Bass, 2008). Nonetheless, the characters present certain emotional development in the form of humanity, empathy, defence of their family and lineage, and trust in providence and divinity. These abilities are particularly apparent in the figure of Isabel la Católica and serve to reinforce the character's femininity.

From a moral perspective, they are all, following Riesman's (1950) terminology, "individuals driven from within," moved by firm convictions and principles, which grant them independence along with a certain type of ethical legitimacy. Their religiosity, sense of state, and the references to honour and glory as motivations of their behaviour lend them an ethical dimension and nuances their cruel attitudes. Their ambition and desire for power is less an individual question and more a sort of collective endeavour. Material or economic considerations are absent from their discourse. Money and wealth are presented as a means to an end: the assumption of new enterprises that will bring an expansion of the nation's and the empire's power. They are not kind-hearted characters, but their sense of state and political intelligence give their decisions a veneer of morality.

The development of the characters of both Isabel and Carlos is narrated in terms of political apprenticeships. The two series show us the path by which the characters become professional politicians. The story focuses on their youth when they assume political responsibility. From that point, we are shown their teachers and the learning process: how they go gaining in confidence and experience and acquire leadership competences. The transformation arch of the Portuguese King Dionis implies he does not lose his political leadership qualities, but the exercise of power and the violence of his losses compromise his humanity, making him vindictive and cruel.

The fiction's political framework is further reinforced by the meaning granted to their private lives. The private sphere is part of the characters' public dimensions. In every case, family and conjugal relations are necessarily at the service of the reasons of the state. On the one hand, they can be instruments to maintain it or help it grow (such as arranged marriages). On the other, blood ties are no impediment to warlike confrontation when the maintenance of power requires it. There is no distinction between the public and private spheres, to the point that politics infuses all the dimensions of the character's existence.

This idea is slightly nuanced in the case of Isabel in that her womanhood is reinforced by maternity. Nevertheless, this is a secondary role in her character's construction and is not, in fact, the fundamental indicator of her femininity. From a clearly post-feminist outlook, Isabel revindicates a way of doing politics which distinguishes her from the male characters in highlighting the value of emotional abilities such as empathy, understanding, or intuition. Reliance on powerful and pioneering female characters is also apparent in *A Rainha e a*

Bastarda in the female protagonist, Isabel of Aragon, the Holy Queen, who plays a political role that was unprecedented in the 13th century.

5.1.2. Politics as Intrigue in Thrillers

Crematorio, *La Embajada*, and *Teorias da Conspiração* are three political thrillers which revolve around the struggle for power and where corruption and nepotism are the norms. They are inhabited by ambitious individuals whose only motivation is material, beyond any moral considerations. The setting and character typology is the ideal petri dish for stories full of intrigue, surprises, and plot twists.

The connections are clear between Rubén Bertomeu, the protagonist of *Crematorio*, and Pedro Soares, in *Teorias da Conspiração*, as political villains. Both characters come to the fore in a situation of international financial crisis in the 2010s, which called for the bailing out of the Spanish and Portuguese economies.

Bertomeu is a prosperous builder who triumphed in the real estate bubble of the 1990s. Intelligent, wise, and an excellent manager, his efficacy is renowned. His hunger for more leads him to assume and normalise illegal practices. He is immoral in his actions and cold in his relationships. The story gives a very clear idea of the development of the character of Bertomeu. Born of an impoverished bourgeois family, his youthful ambitions materialise in the creation of a political and financial web-based on corruption and mafia-like behaviour. There is hardly a trace of emotional abilities in Bertomeu; therefore, his relationships are entirely instrumental. Even his sentimental ties to his partner, Mónica, a young fortune-hunter 30 years his junior, seem to lie in that direction. Soares lacks any emotionality at all, and so has no private life. These failings manifest themselves in sexist, psychopathic attitudes, as well as in the absence of any kind of family or personal ties.

This characterisation is taken to an extreme in the figure of Pedro Soares, a lawyer who manipulates political life through all kinds of bribes and blackmail. Driven by overbearing ambition, he places himself on the other side of the moral fence, even committing murder. Soares' death in the final episode, murdered by his mother while dying in a hospital bed, is the possible redemption for a disaffected character who embodies absolute evil. His opponents, the couple formed by policeman José Madeira and investigative journalist Maria Amado, are the ones who suffer from the plot twists and emerge strengthened in their epic double struggle: to do justice and save their love.

This unreservedly negative characterisation of the two men is reinforced by their shared ending: Their death, as an inevitable result of their unscrupulous behaviour, but also as a sort of moral punishment.

On the contrary, the figure of Luis Salinas appears as an antagonist, an honest man of firm convictions, an ambassador in Thailand and the protagonist of

La Embajada. The character is encountered in a setting that evokes the same ideas of ambition and corruption, surrounded by political villains. The embassy is presented as one more piece in the puzzle of Spanish politics, like a microcosmos in which, despite its distance from the central government in Madrid, the same practices, mindsets, and perverse political usages are reflected. Luis Salinas is a complete outsider, representing the ideal of politics and building an image as utopian as it is positive. Law-abiding and free of any corrupt practices, he is driven by vocation, public service, civic commitment, and the defence of meritocracy and public interest. Moreover, that distinction is the root of the conflict that impels the character. His honesty, as well as his struggle against institutionalised corruption, earn him the animosity of those around him and push him to the limit.

Luis's decency makes him an atypical politician, a surprise for the viewer, extraordinary and epic. Highly qualified and a good manager, he exercises emotional leadership, involving the individuals with whom he has bonds of affection. However, the story points to how little "functionality" these characteristics have in the political terrain. The series highlights how the character threatens the inertia and the status quo of corrupt politics and how his character as a *rara avis* offers him few chances of survival in such a perverse environment.

As the series goes on, we perceive the character's transformation. In some ways, he is obliged to betray his convictions and rectitude. His family's well-being is the justification for his dishonest conduct. However, somehow, he resists to the end, and the final episode sees him achieving his goal of unmasking the corrupt and bringing them to justice.

Luis's positive characterisation is also reflected in the representation of his personal and family life. Empathic and committed, he draws a distinction between his personal and professional lives, giving priority to the former. In fact, the defence of his family is presented as the only limit to his convictions and honesty.

5.1.3. Politics as Comedy

Political satires cover controversial matters utilising parody. The humorous tone of these formats allows them to demonstrate and denounce questions that concern the viewer and tend to be highly topical. It is, therefore, a genre which says a lot about the identity, affinities, and antagonisms of a collective (Brassett et al., 2021).

Created at a time of considerable political disenchantment (Lorente Fontaneda & Sánchez-Vítores, 2018), *Vamos Juan* (which changes to *Venga Juan* in its second season), *El Partido*, and *Os Boys* offer characters and plotlines that respond to the public's alienation from politics.

The two Spanish programmes set out from the same comic premise: The protagonist, a character with a minor political post, is promoted to a position of power.

The weight of the humour lies in the protagonist's absolute incompetence when it comes to performing the tasks inherent to his new job, which gives rise to ridiculous and grotesque situations. The title of the Portuguese series refers to a popular expression for referring to those who support party elites. The protagonist is a man with a shady past who, having just arrived from Brazil, slips into Portuguese political life.

The characterisation of the three men is negative. Juan, the protagonist of *Vamos Juan/Venga Juan*, and Fernando from *El Partido* are both mediocre, anodyne individuals, unqualified people who are thrust into power. This is reflected in both the grammatical errors that pepper their speeches and in their lack of physical attractiveness. Juan is bald and capable of betraying everyone around him to get a hair transplant in Istanbul, and Fernando is baptised by the press as "the ball." César (*Os Boys*) assumes a role which is performed in the other two productions through minor characters: that of a manipulative and unscrupulous political advisor. Although his lean, incisive look reinforces his Machiavellian character, in reality, he is a lonely man whose only company at the end of the day is his friend Bombarda, with whom he criticises others and fuels palace intrigues.

None of the three protagonists is a leader, but upstarts, "straw men" controlled by those who really wield power. This means they never take the obligations to serve that come with their positions seriously. They do not think of the electorate, voters being an annoyance, especially the more needy collectives, whom the protagonists often mock. Verbal humour predominates in these series, based on overstepping the limits of the politically correct, which seems especially offensive coming from a profession from which one presupposes complete correction, at least in public. Access to high political spheres only exacerbates the narcissistic, immature, exhibitionist natures of these characters, plus their lack of ability.

This serves to strengthen the idea that power—or at least its proximity—perverts people. This image is reinforced by the rest of the cast—party colleagues, high-ranking people, and even the Prime Minister—who appear corrupt, implacable, and without scruples. As the advisors in *Os Boys* repeat ironically, "that's the country we've got."

The protagonists, to a greater or lesser degree, commit several crimes in order to keep their privileges: misappropriation, embezzlement, influence peddling, and bribery. With complete naturality and certain insouciance, Juan and Fernando dodge the law to their own benefit with no signs of regret or admission of guilt. In spite of the accusations of fraud that hang over Juan's head being authentic, he does all he can to evade justice and not go to jail. Fernando turns a blind eye to the problems that may be caused for the population of his hometown by a waste plant when he hears how much he is going to make from it. César does not hesitate to leak information—true or otherwise—about his opponents

to keep his party in power. In fact, as can be seen from the closing images of *Os Boys* or *El Partido*, the characters' ambitious natures are stronger than any impulse to do the right thing.

Fernando and Juan pass through similar changes. Although both of them know that not only do they not deserve the positions they have been put forward for but that their acceptance serves to cover up their parties' misdeeds. Nevertheless, they happily agree. The plots underline the characters' transformation: Their lust for power turns them from being diligent, committed men into someone driven towards prestige and recognition. However, César goes through a significant transformation. His awareness of having lost Iris' love, she being the journalist whose career he helped to flourish by exchanging favours, plunges him into a deep depression and precipitates his fall into the implacable world of politics. In the end, César makes himself worthy of Iris and regains some moral decency.

Juan, Fernando, and César's emotional competences are poorly developed and are chiefly portrayed in the relationships they establish with their teams. The almost unconditional support they receive from their advisors and other members of the political grouping helps the viewer relate to characters defined by negative traits. Similarly, the three programmes present female characters who are emotionally linked to the protagonists and who cause a positive change in the men.

As fine exponents of post-humour (Costa, 2010), Juan and Fernando are constructed to seek the amusing side of cringe-making situations and human wretchedness. They are corrupt politicians, but their ineptitude and lack of dignity are such that the viewer does not find them repulsive but feels a mix of pity and sympathy. Indeed, although not feeling close to the protagonists, the audience may see themselves in the characters' weak morals (Adarve, 2017). This point becomes clear in the closing titles of *El Partido*: "Spain loses a lot of money annually due to corruption. Over 300 politicians face charges. But some of them are likeable." Along the same lines, the characters in *Os Boys* are all but grotesque, and their actions so selfish and shameless that they provoke bitter, cynical laughter, fulfilling the old chestnut that the *boys* always have fun at the people's expense.

6. Conclusions

Politics, as a builder of our collective memory, has been introduced into Iberian fiction in the 21st century. Both societies share a dictatorial past that has bred a cynical political culture and distrust of the political class (Linz, 1978). Furthermore, the economic crisis that struck Spain and Portugal especially hard, and the consequent policies of austerity adopted in both countries, bred a climate of dissatisfaction exacerbated by successive revelations in the media of the corruption scandals involving politicians and bankers. This discontent has contributed to the creation of formats with very similar characters and characteristics in the two nations during the second decade of the 21st century.

Those politics-based series produced in recent years on the Iberian Peninsula reflect the people's weariness and their political disaffection. This is treated in two ways. On the one hand, leaders of the past are exalted, hailing their work ethic and commitment to the nation while ignoring fundamental questions of the time, such as inequality or the lack of freedom. On the other, the idea is consolidated that politicians are corrupt by nature and that, faced with this evidence, there is nothing that can be done. The assumption of this principle lets the population off their responsibilities and makes them, both in real life and in fiction, the missing player in the game of politics.

Stories from the past state persons, men and women, with a clear sense of duty which made them place the common good before individual gain. Their royal origins and their honesty freed them from material temptations of such importance to contemporary characters. They were born leaders, and their chief motivation was their commitment to the greatness of the nation. The characterisation of these individuals is eminently positive, despite their lack of connection to the people and their needs.

Meanwhile, other television fiction—thrillers and satire—demonstrate mala praxis in power and correspond to a collective catharsis. They are modern versions of 19th-century literary ideas common to both countries, which portray the country inevitably headed towards the governance of the most corrupt and inept. Thus, politics is presented as a distant place, far from the people, where the search for personal gain predominates. Manipulation and the lack of scruples are manifested as something consubstantial with this world, as can plainly be seen in the treatment meted out by the sector to Luis Salinas, one of the very few honest politicians in these stories.

Finally, it is important to underline that politics is presented, generally, as a male activity. The few female characters who appear are linked by affective ties and, on several occasions, are used as a trigger that makes the protagonists change their negative attitude. The figures of the monarchs Isabel, Queen of Castile, and Isabel, the Portuguese Holy Queen, hold power and show empathy and intelligence that, though it is presented as something positive, never stops belonging to a distinctly emotional sphere, which is not to be seen in the male characters. Politics is portrayed as an activity that essentially promotes but also corrupts men. The female characters are more sentimentalised and romanticised, and their political action is more relational and altruistic. These female characters show more diverse interests and are less focused on the selfish enjoyment of power. This vision coincides with dominant gender perceptions in Spain and Portugal, two countries whose accelerated cultural modernisation coexists with traditionalist representations of gender roles.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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