

Youth culture in Spain: Between cinema and television

Paul Julian Smith
(Graduate Center, City University of New York)

Abstract

Recent work on youth culture has sought to broaden the range of debates that were originally based on examples of teen cinema or subculture drawn from the US or UK. Thus there have been studies of youth culture in global cinema or those attempting to go beyond Anglo-American subculture to address youth and identity in a postcolonial world. Yet Spanish youth media, creatively innovative and commercially successful, have not attracted the scholarly interest they deserve, either at home or abroad. This paper offers case studies of two top-rated TV series from the year 2009. Giving an account of the production and reception of these screen narratives, it traces the growing convergence between the two media of cinema and television. And focusing on the twin questions of immigration and gay youth, it also asks what specificities we find in social representation in a Spanish context. Finally the paper explores the textual composition of the shows, exploring how the peculiar ecology of media in Spain affects the aesthetics of youth culture on film and TV.

1 A Dazzling Age

Recent work on youth culture has sought to broaden the range of debates that were originally based on examples of teen cinema or subculture drawn from the US or UK. Thus there have been studies of youth culture in global cinema (Shary and Seibel 2007) or those attempting to address youth and identity in a postcolonial world (Huq 2006). Yet Spanish youth media, creatively innovative and commercially successful, have not attracted the scholarly interest they deserve. This article offers case studies of two top-rated TV series from the years 2007-2010. Giving an account of the production and reception of these screen narratives, it points to the growing convergence between the two media of cinema and television. And focusing on the three themes of sex and friendship, immigration and ethnicity, and analogue and digital technology, it also asks what specificities we find in social representation in a Spanish context.

It might be said that the study of youth culture in Spain is in its infancy. Thus when respected film historian José Enrique Monterde treats the topic in a collection called “The dazzling age” (*La edad deslumbrante*) (2004) he restricts himself to a canon of US comedies whose apparent transgressiveness is, he says, merely a mask for reactionary machismo (216); claims that the place assigned to “youth” in such films is “witless” (218); and attacks

(unnamed) “infantilized” Spanish critics who have championed the genre, unable to discriminate between the Farrelly brothers and the Taviani brothers (213).

Curiously, another contributor to this volume, published in association with the Gijón International Film Festival, stresses rather the sobriety of Spanish youth: Alex Mendíbil cites statistics suggesting that a large majority of young Spaniards are active as volunteers at schools and in religious organizations; that those lucky enough to have jobs are diligently paying in to their pensions; and that their greatest worry is future financial viability (208). This contrasts markedly once more with Antonio Muñoz Carrión’s study of “tactics of youth communication” in Spain (2007), published in *Revista de Estudios de Juventud*, where he identifies “presentism”, or the lack of temporal horizons, as typical of contemporary teenagers, as, indeed, of their parents at the same age. Although Muñoz’s quantitative study does not treat media, his suggestion that “actions” or “practices” be granted the status of “expressions” is however invaluable in this context.

Elsewhere Carlos Gurpegui Vidal (2005) gives a schematic account of “being young in Spain” as seen through feature films since the death of Franco. Thus the transitional period of 1975-80 was characterized by an obsession with and denunciation of troubled youth; the time of “change” (1981-90) featured stories and genres directed to the youthful demographic itself; a period of “changing of the guard” (1991-2000) saw veteran auteurs addressing the topic; while a final age of “globalization” (2000-5) coincided with the treatment of the social problems of youth within commercially successful films (8). Although Gurpegui’s avowed aim is to find out what these features “tell us about Spanish society”, his study jumps backwards and forwards within his thirty year period, examining films within the broadest of categories: “the rediscovery of childhood”; “the passage to adolescence”; and, finally, “the perversion of an image” (in horror films such as Amenábar’s *Tesis*).

An alternative periodization is given in Carles Feixa’s *Culturas juveniles en España (1960-2004)*, published in 2004 by the *Instituto de la Juventud*, a division of the *Ministerio de Igualdad*. After giving a general history of British subcultures (from Teddy Boys to ravers) Feixa sketches out his Spanish variations on the juvenile theme: “golfos & hippies” (1960-1976), “punkies & posmodernos” (1977-85); “pijos & makineros” (1986-94); “okupas & skinheads” (1995-99); and finally “fiesteros & alternativos” (2000-4) (51-80). As we shall see, in spite of their supposed historical separation from one another, several of these figures coexist in current Spanish TV drama. Feixa devotes just two pages to youth culture on television (167-8), dismissing the then recent pioneering fictions *Compañeros* (Antena 3) and *Al salir de clase* (Tele5) as “promoting a wholly depoliticized model of youth” and presenting

neatly dichotomized protagonists: “the socially positive subject and the one who incarnates all that a good girl or boy shouldn’t do” (168). While periodization is clearly problematic here, it is striking that there have been two periods of efflorescence of mainstream youth media: the shows cited so briefly by Feixa both ran from 1997 or 1998 to 2002 and the genre was to revive only at the end of the decade.

2 Two TV Case Studies: Production and Consumption

My own TV case studies are mystery *El internado* (“The Boarding School”), which premiered in 2007 and whose final episode was shown Wednesday 13th October with a 19% share and an audience of nearly three and a half million (Audiencias 2010); and drama *Física o química* (“Physics or Chemistry”) which began in 2008 and started its sixth season Wednesday 15th September 2010. Meanwhile 2009, a year of particularly strong TV drama (Smith 2009), also saw no fewer than three teen movies in the box office top ten (*Mentiras y gordas*, *Fuga de cerebros*, and *Pagafantas*). Curiously this period of intense activity coincided with the smallest cohort of Spanish teens ever, as a plunging birthrate had reached a low of 1.18 in 1995, a record in Western Europe (Bosch 1998). Young people, so attractive to advertisers, had thus become a scarce commodity by the end of the first decade of the millennium.

In this context of scarcity, young photogenic actors take on a particularly intense image value. A photo spread by movie magazine *Fotogramas* in April 2009 showcased thirteen so-called “Teletalents ... with a foot in the cinema”, posing for the camera in a chaotic classroom set (Fotogramas 2009). On the board is chalked up a series of “technical terms”, all Anglicisms drawn from the TV industry: share, prime time, rolling average etc. This feature not only reveals the pliancy of the Spanish print media in promoting the newly converged worlds of small and large screen fiction. It also confirms the centrality of my chosen TV fictions: *El internado* provides two of *Fotogramas*’ “classmates” and *Física o química* no fewer than four.

These two top rated and prize winning shows would seem to have much in common. In general terms they benefit from the increasing seriality and formal complexity of long form fiction in many countries, exacerbated in the case of Spain by the extended length of episodes which requires bigger casts and yet more intricate storylines than elsewhere. More specifically, they are both teen series set in high schools broadcast at 10 p.m. or shortly after

by national free-to-air web Antena 3. The two shows were frequently cross-promoted, as when young actors from both series were transformed into dwarfish avatars for youth social networking site Habbo (Habbo 2010).

In spite of their domestic origin and focus, both have been widely exported around the world, either in their (dubbed) original form or as formats (*El internado*'s stars were photographed in Tokyo with Japanese schoolgirls [BBVA 2009]; *Physique ou Chimie* is followed by French teens [Tetu 2009]). Dismissed by newspaper critics, both series went on to win major awards from their peers. Finally, the photogenic young crop of stars used their new visibility as a steppingstone to cinema. This was in spite of the perceived crisis in feature film production at the end of a decade when the "death" of Spanish cinema was regularly predicted and the indifference, or frank hostility, of Spanish audiences (especially young Spanish audiences) to Spanish films much remarked on (El País 2009a).

What is striking here when the Spanish shows are compared to the US teen series is what is left out. For example, the theme of popularity, with its subsets of proficiency in fashion and sport (so vital to North American equivalents *Gossip Girl* and *Glee*), is generally absent in both Spanish shows. Moreover the motif of class conflict, ubiquitous in Latin American teen telenovela such as the Mexican *Rebelde*, is greatly attenuated in Spain.

As I wrote earlier, *El internado* entered its last season in spring 2010. The series' allegiance to horror is signalled by the name of its single location, an unfeasibly isolated private school called "The Black Lagoon". And although its main attraction is the young ensemble, in and out of their fetching blue uniforms, *El internado* boasts a prestige veteran cast: curmudgeonly housekeeper Amparo Baró has been a star of stage and screen for over fifty years. As an ostentatious example of "quality" TV, *El internado* also benefits from an expert art design with a large set of 1200 square metres and frequent exterior shots in the gloomy forest whose mysterious denizens threaten the pupils (formulatv 2007a). The disturbing premise of the first season was a quest for murdered orphans. And in successive years conspiracy theories have involved Nazis, explosions, and deadly viruses (in the finale the school burned down).

El internado's dark palette could hardly be further from the clashing colours of *Física o química*. Freed from the constraints of *El internado*'s modest uniforms, wardrobe is embraced here as a source of pleasure. *Física o química*'s rating and share rose to reach a high point in the second season of almost four million viewers and an enviable 21% share (Formulatv 2008a). A weekly drama with comic elements, noticeably absent in *El internado*, *Física o*

química crosscuts between the private and professional lives of teachers and pupils at the troubled Madrid high school named, with some irony, after Golden Age painter Zurbarán.

Física o química is, unlike *El internado*, clearly embedded in contemporary society, addressing such issues as teen homosexuality, drug abuse, eating disorders, and racism. And for every seven days the crew shoots on its 1600 square metre set, it films three on location, mainly on the outskirts of the capital (Formulatv 2007b). The show's amphetamine rush theme tune, by local pop rockers Despistaos, also contrasts with *El internado*'s lush orchestral soundtrack.

While both series are broadcast by Antena 3, *El internado* is made by Globomedia, Spain's most reputed independent producer. Globomedia had signed an exclusive production agreement with the broadcaster, said to result from increased competition for quality, scripted content in a country which has no fewer than six free to air national channels. Globomedia is known for innovative programming over some twenty years. Its heritage of top rated shows and the continued presence of executive producer Daniel Écija help to explain why a horror title like *El internado* can claim to target a "family audience" (Formulatv 2007a). *Física o química*, which is credited to a single "creator" (Carlos Montero) and is produced by the lesser known Ida Y Vuelta, spurns this broader demographic, using casting to create a sense of greater immediacy: unlike the somewhat older stars of *El internado*, the untried actors of *Física o química* are real teenagers.

Although *El internado* has its fair share of body horror and nudity, it was *Física o química* that provoked a full-blown media panic. *Física o química* is invariably invoked by journalists to illustrate stories that show TV as "bad machine". Thus the show's liberal use of expletives in its dialogue is contrasted unfavourably with the modesty of the US networks (El País 2009b); a report on media multitasking by isolated teens cites young viewers watching the show they surf the net (El País 2010); small children viewing outside their lengthy government "protected" time slots are said to gravitate to *Física o química* (formulatv 2009); and a survey of product placement on Spanish television highlights this title's unique selling points (El País 2009c). When web marketer "The TV Wardrobe" ("El Armario de la Tele") was set up, pitching to teens the fashions featured on a wide range of Spanish TV fiction, the press report was illustrated by a screen grab of two *Física o química* stars in their stylish leisure wear (El País 2009d).

It is scarcely surprising, then, that *Física o química* has been attacked by parents' associations (El Mundo 2008), teachers' unions, and the Children's Ombudsman for Madrid (ABC 2009). When a *botellón* (public drinking session) turned into a small riot in an outer

suburb of Madrid, there was no doubt for the mayor which teen TV show was to blame (El País 2009e). It is striking that, even as they antagonize adult newspaper readers, many of the developments listed above can be read as innovations in production or promotion: attempts to attract and monetize fleeting teen viewers and web traffic prompted by the “mother ship” of the TV series.

El internado has perhaps benefited from the more expert brand extension. For the first time in Spain, complete episodes were posted on the internet shortly before the first broadcast. Next came feature length TV specials, a mobile phone video game, an alternate reality game in association with Coca Cola which attracted 850,000 page views, and, for more literate fans, a series of books (formulatv 2008b). *El internado* is thus a 360-degree brand, rare indeed in Europe and comparable only to the immersive experience of the most creative US series such as the *Lost* to which it bears a passing resemblance in its labyrinthine plotting and the cult fandom it has provoked.

Less immersive and more everyday as a brand, still *Física o química* has staged elaborate season premieres. At one 2009 event excited crowds blocked Madrid’s Gran Vía as the young cast posed like seasoned movie stars on the red carpet. Just weeks later three of their members were invited to serve as grand marshals at Madrid’s huge LGBT Pride celebrations, whose theme that year was aptly enough “education”. Taking advantage of their political platform, the actors delivered an earnest speech on equality to impatient gay fans.

3 The Multiple Realities of TV Fiction

As the above example suggests, both series can thus be read as educational in the broadest sense of the word, in John Ellis’s phrase, “working through” vital problems for their faithful audiences, problems that can have no definitive solution on or off screen (Ellis 2000: passim). Moreover the most cursory examination of *Física o química*’s plotlines reveals that the scourges of sex, drugs, and alcohol, which adult critics constantly claim are merely “trivialized” in the show, wreak dramatic damage on the teens who indulge in them. But we must also go beyond the “effects” debate, still taken for granted in public discourse on teen media in Spain, to discover a new qualitative theoretical model that takes TV narration seriously as a form for negotiating different life-worlds. And here I appeal to Milly Buonanno’s recent monograph *The Age of Television: Experiences and Theories* (2008).

In her convincing and eloquent account of media storytelling, which draws on a wide range of earlier sociological sources, Buonanno addresses the “multiple realities of television fiction” in which TV serves, still, as a social “super-narrator” (70). Cutting the Gordian knot of “realism” (still invoked by both defenders and detractors of shows like *Física o química*), Buonanno argues that television drama neither faithfully mirrors reality nor distorts it, but is rather an “interpretative practice” that “organise[s] experience into a narrative form” (72). Furthermore “narrating” and “knowing” are conjoined, derived from a cognate Sanskrit root (73). “The disruptive force of narrative imagination”, for Buonanno, thus “rests effectively in its freedom to transcend reality” (74). This does not mean, however, that it turns its back on the real: rather it “alienate[s] us from [real life] sufficiently to tempt us into thinking of alternatives beyond it” (75). These “imagined alternatives work together with cultural and social change in the real world and so contribute to the redefining of shared conceptions of what is normal and what violates the norm”; or again they give “access to a plurality of possible worlds that form an integral part of the multiple realities that inform our life experience” (75).

Buonanno cites Don Quixote at the puppet show in this context. Unlike the dreaming knight, however, TV viewers are not perniciously enthralled by the lures of fiction but rather able to recognize the specific cognitive styles of stratified “life-worlds” and to migrate between them (76). While there are indeed “overlapping spaces and interaction” between the imagined and the real and the former can “intersect with and to some extent modify our everyday life”, the domestic location of television makes it a special case: “watching television creates the conditions for more fluid and continuous switching and for transitions between the real and the imaginary that are less pronounced and upsetting” (77).

This friendly approach to TV thus leads to a rereading of earlier models: Buonanno’s sense of the “widened horizons of mediated experiences” revalorizes William’s “dramatized society” and Giddens’s “mediated experience” as positive goods (78); the de-localization of social life is not Meyrowitz’s deprivation (“no sense of place”) but rather an additional resource: “the possibility of coming into contact with [the] spatially [and, we might add, the chronologically] far away” (79); Horton and Wohl’s “para-social interactions” with beloved media friends should not be pathologized but rather seen as “an extension and enrichment of the personal capital of social relationships” and an “intensification” of such experiences (81). Finally television offers us frequent, and safe, contact with fundamental areas of human experience which, according to Giddens, have become rare, “sequestered” from modern life: “folly, criminality, death, sexuality, and nature” (82). For Buonanno there is little point in

“measuring the amount of violence shown in order to infer its effects on behaviour”, while failing to recognize the homeopathic function of TV: “mediated contact with sequestered experiences subsumes the conditions for neutralizing [audiences’] insecurity” (82).

In this context of the “vast range of experience” made available to today’s public (“access to social settings far removed in space and time; interaction with personalities once has never met...; contacts with fundamental areas that are concealed from human life” [83]), Buonanno cites empirical research on a French teen drama of the 1990s. Adolescent fans found here “a guide on finding one’s way through the still unexplored territory of romantic love, relations between couples and feminine identity... without falling into the trap of naively identifying the fictitious character with her real-life portrayer” (82). We can now go on to explore how Spanish teens are represented (and how they respond) in the terra incognita of their TV fiction.

4 Textual Analysis: Specimen Episodes

By the time the fourth episode of *El internado* (titled “Message in a Bottle”) was broadcast on June 14, 2007 the series had established itself as the most successful launched by Antena 3 in some years. And, in spite of the sobriety of its handsome set and the underplaying of its large cast, it had done so employing some melodramatic plotlines worthy of the Mexican telenovelas that in Spain are relegated to the afternoon. Thus round-faced María has escaped from a mental hospital and disguised herself as a maid in order to track down the son who was sold to a wealthy couple by an abusive partner. Sharp-featured director of studies Elsa has got her claws in head teacher Héctor. In a classic example of sexual tension, María and Héctor will be drawn to one another. The adults’ love triangle is echoed by that of the pupils. Sexy bad boy Iván (Yon González, the school bully) is the steady boyfriend of sexy rich girl Carolina, but she is attracted by sensitive new boy Marcos, who has arrived at the school with his little sister Paula. Stereotypical plotlines of love, jealousy, and conflict are thus set up along classic dichotomies.

These well-worn and sometimes sentimental moments, typical of domestic soap opera, are oddly juxtaposed with horror tropes that reference a distinctly Spanish cinematic tradition. There are several elements of plotting and mise en scène reminiscent of *El laberinto del fauno* (2006). When two little girls gather around the well, we are reminded perhaps of *El espíritu de la colmena* (Víctor Erice, 1973). When they go down to the lake to launch a message in a

bottle they encounter a monster. This is, of course, a remake of the famous scene in James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931), itself replayed by Erice.

Given these classic references it is hardly surprising that *El internado* barely treats the social issues central to more overtly contemporary shows like *Física o química*. The kids do not appear to have sex and it is left to fans to speculate on the homoerotic tension between rivals Iván and Marcos, who often confront one another in the showers. This is the least overtly gay or lesbian boarding school in audiovisual memory.

Likewise the theme of race and immigration, so evident in contemporary Spain, barely registers. Carolina speaks with the Cuban accent of the young actress that plays her, but she is identified not as a foreigner but rather as a posh kid. And, with the location of the school unestablished, the closest we get to Spanish geography is when bully Iván taunts Marcos for his Galician accent.

In a similar way technology is mainly analogue. In this cloistered world, the arrival of a single email is enough to provoke consternation; and the kids rarely seem to use their mobile phones, in the first episodes at least. As we shall see, and as the cinematic references in the narrative suggest, it is celluloid that still rules the roost here. *El internado* is nonetheless clearly set in the present: in the first episode one teacher sarcastically asks another, who is searching for evidence of the school's hidden history: "Have you found the weapons of mass destruction yet?" But beyond this contemporary paranoia, favoured horror tropes refer back to the past. Thus troubling Holocaust references will lead to the revelation of a Nazi conspiracy behind the all too respectable scenes. Little Paula is kidnapped by unseen tormenters who experiment on her body; and, she is kitted out with an ostentatious red coat reminiscent of the girl who served as the only splash of colour in the monochrome *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1983).

While such references might appear to be gratuitous, even offensive, it is here that *El internado*'s barely masked engagement with contemporary Spain becomes evident. The disappearance of the orphans is placed precisely within the last bloody days of the dictatorship (1973). The show thus not only implies the close connection between Franco's regime and that of Hitler; it also comes close to commenting directly on the Law of Historical Memory and the movement to excavate mass Civil War burial sites. Ironically it does so precisely at those points when it most clearly cites the fictional tradition of film horror. Like their little girl, the creators of the series place their "message" in a pretty bottle: a package of young photogenic actors with a particularly intense image value.



Let us look more closely at the climactic sequence of episode 4. Five of the teens make it down to the labyrinthine passageways where the bodies of the orphans are buried (figure 1). In a distant alcove they discover a projector screening a film. It is of mutant or mutilated children: the infants have two heads or two trunks joined together. Then comes black and white footage of the terrified orphans shortly before their death, shot in that very place (figure 2). We cut from the five dead children of the past to the five live teens of the present, watching the latter as they in turn watch the former. There is thus a kind of historiographical metafiction at work here, a meditation on the continued presence of the past in the present.



Clearly, *El internado* is an excellent example of the multiple realities of television fiction. Indeed, we can re-read the series in terms of Buonanno's three conditions of TV narration. Firstly, *El internado* de-localizes social life in its oddly abstracted dramatic space that offers little or no sense of place. Yet we are offered the clear and rare possibility of coming into contact with what is far away, a secluded setting referencing the Francoist dictatorship, so distant from the concerns of allegedly "presentist" teenagers with little sense of historical horizons. The bridge to such far-flung territory is Buonanno's second factor: the para-social interaction with characters. The fact that such interaction is perceived as an extension and enrichment of the personal capital of social relationships is confirmed by the evidence of fans' bulletin boards on the show. Finally, *El internado* is an extreme example of TV drama's focus on the rare experiences "sequestered" from everyday life: folly, criminality, death, sexuality, and nature.

If the authorities seem oddly untroubled by the sometimes explicit violence of the show, this is because *El internado* takes care to neutralize its audience's insecurities. It does so even as it places us in contact with fundamental areas that are normally concealed from human life in Spain today, but were much more visible in tragic episodes of still recent history. It is to *El internado*'s credit, then, that it has used youth culture, so frequently dismissed as reactionary, witless, or trivial to create an immersive experience of impressive narrative complexity.

By the twelfth episode of its second season (broadcast on November 24, 2008) *Física o química* was building to its greatest audience. And, as in *El internado*, soapy plotlines favoured love triangles that arced across the lengthy series. Thus sexy blond Ruth hesitates between abusive bad boy Gorka and cute, rich Cabano. There is also a love triangle on the teachers' side. Typically, parallels between the two worlds tend to establish that adults are like kids, while kids are like adults.

Pedagogy thus cuts both ways. And *Física o química*'s classroom has some semblance of educational content. In this second season one philosophy class cites Ortega y Gasset's "Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia" ("I am myself and my circumstances"). And the ensemble nature of the show is its greatest strength with its many teens barely differentiated by their colourful costumes. There are traces of Spanish youth subculture here: Punky Paula boasts spiky hair and piercing, but out gay Fer and Chinese immigrant Jan dress (and act) no differently to their peers. Yoli's origins in a working class suburb may be signalled by her preference for huge hoop earrings, but her overtly sexy fashion choices are clearly acceptable. The show thus works to unsettle stereotypes.

Moreover the controversial social issues attacked by critics are integrated into the narrative lines and psychological profiles of the shows intricate plots and multifaceted characters. Let us start with sex. Countering the stereotype of reactionary machismo, the girls in *Física o química* are generally shown to be in control of their love lives. Yoli demands to be treated with respect, however many men she sleeps with. When Ruth decides to invite Gorka back to her bedroom, insisting he use a condom, he is struck with youthful impotence (a recurring theme in the show).

It is striking that *Física o química* skipped quickly in its first season over such themes as coming out and racism, which monopolize many series' interest in their gay or minority characters. The queer plotline in this episode is a teacher's choice of a play with a gay theme for the school's drama group. Apparently based on the real-life children's book *King and King* (a fairy tale in which Prince Charming passes over a Princess in favour of a handsome male suitor), the drama plotline involves sustained commentary on social behaviour as performance. For example, punky Paula uses drama class to give voice to her real concerns: that her Chinese boyfriend Jan is falling for the cousin with whom he is obliged to contract a sham marriage. Exploring the gay theme further, Gorka volunteers to play a prince even if it involves kissing a guy (the gay Fer) in order to show sensitivity and win back a lost girlfriend (figure 3). The show offers some unforced education on homosexual panic: Gorka is ridiculed for fearing that queerness can be caught "like flu" and is cured of his fears by a lengthy kiss from Fer, which proves that both boys feel nothing for one another.



The immigration plotline, with its equal emphasis on performance, authenticity, and the blurring between the two, plays out in tandem with the gay play. And it is significant that the

series chose to incorporate a Chinese character, thus highlighting perhaps the least visible immigrant community in Spanish television and cinema. Striking here is the theme of selflessness and cross-cultural empathy: Paula accepts that Jan must obey his parents and marry his cousin. We are far indeed from the allegation of the show's critics that it "trivializes" sex or, indeed, from the promise of *Física o química*'s theme tune, which evokes the ecstasy of exchanged body fluids ("your saliva in my saliva: physics or chemistry").

Let us look more closely at a late sequence that reveals how such broadly educational elements (anti-homophobia and anti-racism) are embedded in an attractive narrative and visual style. A plangent song from *Despistaos* (authors of the breathless theme tune) signals extended crosscutting between two exteriors: the public park where the kids have decided to put on the play after it was banned by the school and the town hall where the Chinese wedding will simultaneously take place. Against all expectations, homophobic bully Gorka takes his role as same-sex suitor as seriously as does the gay Fer.

Likewise Jan and Xiao Mei's ceremony proves surprisingly affecting (figure 4). While the prince in the play confesses he must be honest about his feelings, the bridegroom at the wedding is urged to "help his family", a more ambivalent, but no less important, imperative. The show cuts directly from the gay kiss, applauded by a large audience, to the straight kiss, passionate on the part of the bride at least (figure 3, figure 4). As so often in the series, straight and gay plotlines run strictly parallel, with no distinction made between them. Moreover in a sound bridge that further connects the two scenes the ambient noise of audience applause and the plangent song of *Despistaos* bleed over from one location to the other.



Just as *El internado* serves as a kind of commentary on the historiography of the horror genre, so *Física o química* incorporates its own critique: a hostile representative of the school's parents' association warns that while laws concerning same sex marriage may have changed, attitudes towards homosexuality and minors have not. It may well be the case, then, that the acceptance of gays and immigrants presented as natural on *Física o química* is not universal in actual Spanish high schools. However, the series' imagined alternatives can perhaps work together with cultural and social change in the real world to contribute to the redefining of shared conceptions of what is normal and what violates the norm. This is the case within the show itself where the homophobe is led slowly towards a very public embrace with another boy. The series thus teaches its viewers to switch between a plurality of possible worlds while recognizing the differences between them: finally, Gorka does not believe that playing gay will make him gay. Para-social interaction with such characters, some of whom remain infrequent in Spanish cinema (there is also a sympathetic schoolboy who is an evangelical Christian), promotes a valuable extension of life experience.

Física o química offers its viewers mediated contact with sequestered areas normally concealed from the sphere of everyday life. For example the foolish, the criminal, and the sexual come together in one plot line where a schoolboy works for a porn website. And in each season at least one of the regular characters, experimenting too recklessly with drugs or alcohol, meets a tragic death. Life at the Zurbarán is hardly a faithful mirror of reality; nor would we watch if it was. But the show does organize real life experiences into a compelling narrative form. It thus expresses the disruptive force of narrative imagination that in Buonanno's words "alienate[s] us from [real life] sufficiently to tempt us into thinking of alternatives beyond it" (75).

5 Schools for Scandal?

In summer 2009 the frontier between television and film was breached with unusual intensity: as I mentioned in the introduction to this piece, three teen ensemble films were amongst the biggest grossing at the box office that year (exceeding Almodóvar's much heralded *Los abrazos rotos*). Compared to the TV series, however, the films are crude and regressive. Two (*Mentiras y gordas* and *Fuga de cerebros*) rely on a hoary plotline that could have come from the 1970s: a closeted gay character who is tragically in love with his straight best mate. *Física o química* is far more complex and convincing on that theme.

Spanish teen TV also crossed international barriers, carried by informal electronic means. A new and touching gay love affair for Fer found female fans as far away as the US, where one enthusiast lovingly subtitled sequences in English before posting them on YouTube (foqfan 2009). And grateful viewers from Mexico to Argentina thanked the actor for his portrayal of a “natural” and non-stereotypical gay youth of a kind they had not encountered in their own television series (blogspot 2008).

Class room drama is thus pedagogic in more than one sense: *El internado*'s viewers may not discover too much about contemporary Spain (beyond the symptomatic return of repressed cadavers), but *Física o química*'s attentive audience will learn much about the legal status of minors like themselves in relation to such vital topics as marriage, abortion, and rape. Far from being a school for scandal, the Zurbarán thus offers an education in responsible citizenship. It is not that the kids are depoliticized, as critics of Spanish teen drama have claimed, but rather that the model of “tolerance” such series promote may not be to the liking of some adults.

In a special report on global television included in *The Economist* (May 1-7, 2010), television was named “media’s great survivor”, ceaselessly adapting to new circumstances. This is perhaps even more the case in Spain, where quality series continue to attract domestic audiences in their millions and to be exported around the world, even as local film production complains of terminal crisis. And the youth series I have examined have also exploited the new opportunity of transmedia with unusual vigour. As I hope to have shown, teen series in Spain are thus the privileged vehicle for a continuing commentary on sex and friendship, immigration and ethnicity, and analogue and digital technology, one that is couched in a distinct narrative and aesthetic form.

References

- ABC 2009. “La tele contra los padres”. http://www.abc.es/hemeroteca/historico-28-06-2009/abc/Sociedad/la-tele-contra-los-padres_922088140468.html.
- AUDIENCIAS 2010. Audiencias *El internado*. <http://www.formulatv.com/series/146/el-internado/audiencias/>.
- BLOGSPOT 2008. *Física o Química Blog*. <http://fisicaoquimica.blogspot.com/2008/01/javier-calvo-fer-fsica-o-qumica.html>.

- BOSCH, X. 1998. "Investigating the reasons for Spain's falling birth rate". *Lancet*.
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9742992>.
- BBVA 2009. "El internado visita Japón y estrena tráiler en versión francesa".
<http://soy.bluebbva.com/2009/12/andquotel-internadoandquot-visita-japon-y-estrena-trailer-en-ver.asp>.
- BUONANNO, M. 2008. *The Age of Television: Experiences and Theories*. Bristol: Intellect.
- ECONOMIST, The 2010. "Special Report on Television". 1-7 May.
- ELLIS, J. 2000. *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- FEIXA, C. 2004. *Culturas juveniles en España*. Madrid: Injuve.
- FOQFAN 2009. <http://www.youtube.com/user/FOQFAN>.
- FORMULATV 2007a. "Antena 3 presenta *El internado*, su primera gran apuesta con Globomedia". <http://www.formulatv.com/1,20070412,4199,1.html>.
- FORMULATV 2007b. "Así es *Física o química*, la nueva apuesta de Antena 3".
<http://www.formulatv.com/1,20071126,6123,1.html>.
- FORMULATV 2008a. "El eterno retorno (2ª parte)". <http://www.formulatv.com/series/fisica-o-quimica/capitulos/7283/>.
- FORMULATV 2008b. "*El internado* también será un videojuego para móviles".
<http://www.formulatv.com/1,20080417,7329,1.html>.
- FORMULATV 2009. "Los niños se decantan por *Los Simpson* y los jóvenes por *Física o química*". <http://www.formulatv.com/1,20090315,10706,1.html>.
- FOTOGRAMAS 2009. "Teletalentos ... con un pie en el cine".
<http://www.fotogramas.es/Cine/Especiales/Generacion-TV-2009>.
- GURPEGUI VIDAL, C. 2005. "Ser joven en España". In C. GURPEGUI VIDAL (ed.), *Apuntes de cine*. Zaragoza: Tierra, 7-31.
- HABBO 2010. Sigue la pista a *El internado* y *Física o química*.
<http://www.habbo.es/articulos/3277-sigue-la-pista-a-el-internado-y-fisica-o-quimica>.
- HUQ, R. 2006. *Beyond Subculture: Pop, Youth, and Identity in a Postcolonial World*. New York: Routledge.
- MENDÍBIL, A. 2004. "El vacío de la Generación X". In V. DOMÍNGUEZ (ed.), *La edad deslumbrante: mitos, representaciones y estereotipos de la juventud adolescente*. Oviedo: Nobel. 179-208.
- MONTERDE, E. "De descerebrados, cabezas huecas, y otras historias". In V. DOMÍNGUEZ (ed.), *La edad deslumbrante: mitos, representaciones y estereotipos de la juventud adolescente*. Oviedo: Nobel. 209-18.

- MUNDO, El 2008. “Críticas a *Física o química* por ‘denigrar y caricaturizar’ la enseñanza”.
<http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2008/02/20/television/1203511736.html>.
- MUÑOZ CARRIÓN, A. 2007. “Tácticas de la comunicación juvenil”.
<http://www.injuve.migualdad.es/injuve/contenidos.downloadatt.action?id=430660664>.
- NOTICIAS. 2 November 2010. “Noticias *El internado* (118)”.
<http://www.formulatv.com/series/146/el-internado/noticias/>.
- PAÍS, El 2009a. “Cine y política van demasiado juntos”.
http://www.elpais.com/articulo/cultura/Cine/politica/van/demasiado/juntos/elpepucul/20090617elpepucul_1/Tes.
- PAÍS, El 2009b. “Tacos en la ‘tele’ para imitar la calle”.
http://www.elpais.com/articulo/sociedad/Tacos/tele/imitar/calle/elpepisoc/20090430elpepisoc_1/Tes.
- PAÍS, El 2009c. “Luz verde al anuncio que se cuele en el guión”.
http://www.elpais.com/articulo/sociedad/Luz/verde/anuncio/cuela/guion/elpepusoc/20090725elpepisoc_1/Tes.
- PAÍS, El 2009d. “Una nueva ‘web’ vende la ropa de la televisión”.
http://www.elpais.com/articulo/Pantallas/nueva/web/vende/ropa/television/elpepirtv/20091212elpepirtv_1/Tes.
- PAÍS, El 2009e. “Los energúmenos no son de aquí”.
http://www.elpais.com/articulo/madrid/energumenos/elpepiespmad/20090908elpmad_3/Tes.
- PAÍS, El 2010. “La foto de la ‘generación búnker””.
http://www.elpais.com/articulo/Pantallas/foto/generacion/bunker/elpepirtv/20101106elpepirtv_1/Tes.
- SHARY, T. and A. SEIBEL 2007. *Youth Culture in Global Cinema*. Austin: University of Texas.
- SMITH, P. J. 2009. “Media migration and cultural proximity: television fiction in Spain, spring 2009”. *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas* 5.1&2, 73-84.
- TETU 2009. “*Physique ou chimie*: la saison 3 attendue en 2010 sur NRJ12”.
<http://www.tetu.com/actualites/television/physique-ou-chimie-la-saison-3-attendue-en-2010-sur-nrj12-15719>.