

A dialogic perspective between the productive structure and the narratives of Argentine television fictions (2011-2020)

Una perspectiva dialógica entre la estructura productiva y las tramas narrativas de las ficciones seriadas televisivas argentinas (2011-2020)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2022.8330>

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This article analyzes how the ownership structure and the alliances between the agents producing serialized fiction for television are linked to the themes and narratives addressed by this type of cultural product. From the political economy of communication and cultural studies, the paper examines the predominant themes in the 100 most watched premiere fictions on open television in Argentina during the decade between 2011 and 2020. It is concluded that there is a wide predominance of universal themes with non-structural local references, over purely local ones.

KEYWORDS: Television serial fiction, production companies, audiovisual content, narratives, Argentina.

Este artículo analiza cómo la estructura de propiedad y las alianzas entre los agentes productores de ficción seriada para televisión se vinculan con las temáticas y narrativas abordadas por este tipo de producto cultural. Desde la economía política de la comunicación y los estudios culturales, el trabajo recupera las temáticas predominantes en las 100 ficciones de estreno más vistas en la televisión abierta de Argentina durante la década comprendida entre los años 2011 y 2020. Se concluye que existe un amplio predominio de temáticas universales con referencias locales no estructurales, sobre las puramente locales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ficción seriada televisiva, productoras, contenidos audiovisuales, narrativas, Argentina.

Este artigo analisa como a estrutura de propriedade e as alianças entre os agentes que produzem a ficção seriada para a televisão estão vinculadas aos temas e narrativas abordados por esse tipo de produto cultural. A partir da economia política da comunicação e estudos culturais, o trabalho recupera os temas predominantes nas 100 ficções de estreia mais assistidas na televisão aberta na Argentina durante a década entre 2011 e 2020. Conclui-se que há uma ampla predominância de temas universais com não referências locais estruturais, sobre as puramente locais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ficção seriada televisiva, produtoras, conteúdo audiovisual, narrativas, Argentina.

How to cite:

Carboni, O. & Rivero, E. (2022). A dialogic perspective between the productive structure and the narratives of Argentine television fictions (2011-2020). *Comunicación y Sociedad*, e8330. <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2022.8330>

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Submitted: 10/31/21. Accepted: 06/17/22. Published: 11/09/22.

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing processes of digitization, convergence and globalization experienced by the cultural industries in recent decades have had a structural impact on production, distribution and exhibition, also configuring fragmented and deterritorialized audiences from the point of view of consumption. These changes permeate both, the productive processes and the organization of work as well as the ways of consuming, visualizing and accessing fiction audiovisual contents.

Despite the entry of large global platforms as producers and distributors of national serialized fiction as of 2018, most of the productions circulating for consumption in the Expanded Audiovisual Space (Marino, 2016) were originated individually or promoted by different alliances between traditional actors of the audiovisual industry: open television channels, pay television providers, pay television signals and audiovisual production companies.

From a theoretical perspective that articulates issues from the subfield of the political economy of communication with contributions from cultural studies, the aim of this article is to analyze the relationship between the origin and ownership structure of the different agents producing serialized fiction for open television in Buenos Aires and the predominant themes in the productions concerning the presence of “the local” or the approach to global/universal issues in the narratives. It is assumed that in order to place their serialized fictions in the international market, peripheral countries such as Argentina appeal to narratives strongly anchored in the local, which gives them a differential value in a market still dominated by the American cultural industry.

At a methodological level, a data matrix was designed with all serial fictions broadcast by open television in Buenos Aires³ in the

³ These are the fictions broadcast by the open television channels *Telefé* (Viacom CBS), *El Trece* (Grupo Clarín), *América TV* (Grupo América), *Canal 9* (Grupo Octubre), *TV Pública* (National State) and *Net TV* (Editorial Perfil), which operate from the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires (AMBA) but whose contents reach most of the national territory through different means.

decade between 2011 and 2020. Only national productions premiering in each year were considered and those whose broadcasting lasted more than one year in the programming grid were also counted, giving a total of 220 fictions. From that universe, a sample of the ten most watched fictions each year (100 in total) was selected to identify their predominant themes.

To obtain it, the average rating of each program was taken into account. At this point, it should be noted that, although multiplatform and unscheduled audiovisual consumption is an increasingly widespread practice, rating continues to be a relevant data in relation to the measurement of linear television audiences; an indicator also considered by producers and the advertising industry in their decision making. It is also one of the few tools that allows a comparative and diachronic reading of the evolution of the consumption of audiovisual products, given the infrequency and opacity of the indicators disseminated by some actors such as platforms and specialized consulting firms.

In sum, the article presents, from a dialogic perspective, the characteristics of the productive structure of serialized fiction for open television and its interrelations with the themes and plots that fictional products address. The option for a diachronic type of analysis covering the decade between 2011 and 2020 provides elements to also understand the evolution and dynamics between these two aspects over time.

TELEVISION SERIAL FICTION: INDUSTRY AND CULTURAL ARTIFACT

The open television system in Buenos Aires is made up of six stations, four of them have licenses in the City of Buenos Aires and one in La Plata (Province of Buenos Aires), being TV Pública the only channel with national coverage license. Although the Buenos Aires commercial broadcasters *Telefe*, *El Trece*, *Canal 9* and *Net TV* have local licenses in the City of Buenos Aires, and in the case of *América TV* in the city of La Plata, a factual distribution architecture has been created whereby its contents reach the whole country in different ways: through affiliates, repeaters or direct sale of contents to local channels. Only the state broadcaster alone covers most of the national territory with its signal (99.5%). The channel *Net TV* (*Grupo Perfil*) started its transmissions

in October 2018, and like the other open television channels, can be watched through air, Digital Terrestrial Television or in subscription television systems.

For decades, Argentina has exhibited a media system characterized by a high concentration, both, in its ownership and in the geographic centers of content production as well as consumption (Becerra & Mastrini, 2017). This situation determines that the audiovisual context of the country in terms of content production, especially fiction, is largely defined by the characterization of these actors. The efforts to deconcentrate production carried out by the National State, particularly between 2010 and 2015, with the promotion of fiction production in the provinces, did not manage to alter this centralization scenario (Rivero, 2018).

As for fiction contents, El Trece and Telefe, the market leaders since the early 1990s, have concentrated the most consumed fictional production during the period under study. In the case of El Trece, national fiction has been provided by its production company Pol-Ka, while Telefe works with a couple of independent production companies, particularly Underground (Telemundo), which produces for its prime-time. Since 2014, both channels have programmed an increasing amount of foreign fictions, particularly of Turkish and Brazilian origin, with which they reached high audience levels in prime-time and at low costs, to the detriment of a decreasing national production of premiere serialized fiction (Kirchheimer & Rivero, 2021; Rivero, 2020).

The case of television serialized fiction is a subject that has been widely approached from different points of view within the television industry, and one of the pioneers was Martín-Barbero (1987), who early understood the double role of these contents, as a specific product of the television industry and of popular success. Thus, he described the articulation between the commercial logics of their production and the cultural logics of their consumption, basing his proposal on the triadic relationship between the television industry (the structure and dynamics of production), the cultural groups (social uses and ways of watching) and the products (textual composition of the telenovela).

A considerable number of studies were carried out in Argentina by Mazziotti (1994, 1996, 2002, 2006), who analyzed telenovelas from the

production sphere (production, sale and circulation of these products) and identified the existence of studies linked to textuality, program contents and audiences.

Another perspective was proposed by Steimberg (1997) who identified the stylistic ruptures of Argentine telenovelas. According to the author, during the first two decades of Argentine television, melodrama was the topic par excellence of fictions. The second phase (1975-1990) was characterized by social verisimilitude, including conflicts and social changes of the time. Telenovelas became self-referential by exceeding the scope of fiction and appearing as a social fact, susceptible of being commented. Finally, in the 1990s there was evidence of an interweaving of genres and the multiplication of narratives with stories that followed each other in parallel.

Carboni (2015) carried out a period-based reconstruction of the development of fiction in Argentina and proposed four stages. The first one was linked to an experimental and artisanal phase of production. Between 1950 and the mid-1960s, there was a shift from an artisanal and intuitive way of making television to commercial and competitive models that included financing through advertising and audience measurement. Then, fiction productions became more sophisticated with respect to aesthetics and art, the average length of the chapters was half an hour, a situation that began to be reversed with the appearance of the videotape in 1964, which made it possible to record programs. Along with editing, the international commercialization of audiovisual products, particularly telenovelas, was enabled.

The second phase considered fictions as an industrial product (1970-1988). Telenovelas gained strength throughout Latin America as exportable products. Although Argentina remained on the margins due to the production restrictions imposed by the dictatorship (1976-1983), the return of democracy began to timidly reactivate the sector. By then, the process of professionalization and industrialization was underway. The third moment of incipient transnationalization lasted from 1989-2001, that is, from the privatization of the main open television channels to the outbreak of the economic, political, social and institutional crisis in the country, which also had its repercussions on the audiovisual sector. Until the mid-1990s, there was a boom in co-

productions. Then, the space for local fictions declined, partly because programmers were not willing to sustain on the air products that did not quickly reach the expected success. In the case of telenovelas, the themes changed and comedy went hand in hand with romantic plots. Likewise, audiovisual television production companies were created to generate products for the local and/or international market and outsourcing began to enter the production sphere.

The fourth phase was called transnationalization and glocalization of fictions between 2002-2012. After the 2001 crisis, the television industry had to reinvent itself along with the fictional proposals. Local audiovisual production companies aimed at two strategies: on the one hand, to incorporate broad themes and choral casts, breaking away from genre productions, and on the other hand, to establish strategic alliances with international production companies with the double objective of raising capital and locating contents in different countries.

The central aspects of the transnationalization and glocalization phase described above persist at present and become more complex with the phenomenon of platforming and worldwide distribution of fictional contents by large technological companies, which are increasingly entering the audiovisual content production business. However, as we have already pointed out, the most consumed fictions on open television, the target of analysis in this paper, are the result of the agency of traditional players in the audiovisual industry, so the production of fictional contents for platforms falls outside the interests of this article.

ON MARKET STRUCTURE AND SERIALIZED FICTION BROADCASTING

In the years under analysis, the audiovisual television market underwent transformations, including the emergence of global players that produce and broadcast content on digital audiovisual platforms (Netflix, Prime Video, Disney+, among others) and improvements in the quality of connectivity. In a complementary way, features of other stages such as external restructuring processes (De la Garza, 2012) that can be explained by multiple variables were deepened: the relocation of audiovisual content with a view to reducing production costs and

production outsourcing strategies to transfer or minimize the risks involved in the production process.

The execution of the analysis was crossed by methodological decisions. In this sense, in order to count and present the data obtained, the types of production were grouped according to six categories:

- 1) *Local audiovisual majors*:⁴ This category groups the two main producers of fictional contents, Pol-Ka and Telefe Contenidos. The former only produces content for El Trece, owned by Grupo Clarín, which controls 55% of the shareholding through ARTEAR S.A., while the latter is the production company of the Argentine channel of the same name. The station has gone through several owners, in 2016 it was acquired by the Viacom CBS group. At the same time, for the study we classified the productions according to the type of production: individual, coproduction with national and/or international companies.
- 2) *Public entities or organizations*: This category includes Argentine public broadcasters, including TV Pública (Canal 7) founded in 1951, which gave birth to television in the country, and a handful of thematic public broadcasters created in the 21st century, such as Canal Encuentro (2007), TecTV (2011) and Paka-Paka (2010).
- 3) *Public entities or organizations in association with audiovisual production companies with a track record and/or with audiovisual production companies with little or no track record*: This dimension includes productions made with public funding, either through specific bids to finance the serialized production of national fiction, many of them implemented through the Instituto Nacional de Cine y Artes Audiovisuales (INCCA) or other projects carried out by public television channels (TV Pública, Canal Encuentro, TecTV, among others). In this case, we will differentiate between production companies with background, that is, those production

⁴ When we refer to local audiovisual major, we are referring to the fact that they are based in the country, and not to the share capital of the company, which may be of foreign origin.

units that regularly provide and/or give fictional content to television broadcasters and whose emergence dates back to the mid-1990s onwards in Argentina,⁵ and audiovisual production companies with little or no background that sporadically make fictional products, of which a significant number achieved their existence status as of 2010 when public policies for audiovisual production were implemented. For this reason, and as we have explained, it is a highly dynamic market, in which the mapping of actors is constantly changing.

- 4) *Co-production between national audiovisual production companies (except for audiovisual majors)*: all productions undertaken in collaboration between national companies are included.
- 5) *National audiovisual production companies in association with international production companies (except for audiovisual majors)*: This includes all productions undertaken in collaboration between a national and an international production company, but does not include national market leaders.
- 6) *National audiovisual production companies with a track record and/or with little or no track record*: This category is made up of all audiovisual production companies that have had a presence in the television grid within the study period, we have already explained the differences between both types of companies.

Based on the above, the original broadcasting of 220 serialized fictions was counted throughout the decade analyzed. According to the proposed categorization, we observed that almost 37% was produced by the two local audiovisual majors; a figure close to 36% was in the hands of public entities or agencies in association with audiovisual production companies with a track record and/or with audiovisual production companies with little or no track record. The

⁵ Among the audiovisual production companies with track records, the following stand out: Dori Media, RGB, ON TV, Underground, Endemol Argentina, Cris Morena Group, LCA Producciones. In addition, a portion of these production companies were originated by members of the vernacular star system (actors, actresses, TV hosts) or come from families related to the artistic field, as in the case of Sebastián Ortega or Gustavo Yankelevich.

third place, with a little more than 15%, was occupied by national audiovisual production companies with a track record and/or with little or no track record. Almost 40% of the total number of fictions produced during the whole decade in the hands of only two companies from Buenos Aires is indicative, as we have already pointed out, of the high levels of concentration and geographical centralization of the activity.

TABLE 1
PREMIERE FICTION BROADCAST ON OPEN TELEVISION IN BUENOS AIRES
(2011-2020) BY PRODUCTION AGENTS

Type of production agent	Productions	%
Audiovisual majors (Telefe Contenidos and Pol-Ka)	82	37.3
Public entities or agencies in association with audiovisual production companies with a track record and/or with audiovisual production companies with little or no track record	79	35.9
National audiovisual production companies with a track record and/or with few or no track records	34	15.5
National audiovisual production companies in association with international production companies (except for audiovisual majors)	14	6.4
Co-production between national audiovisual production companies (except audiovisual majors)	8	3.6
Public entities or organizations	3	1.4
Total	220	100.0

Source: The authors.

If we break down these global data, in the case of Telefe Contenidos we find that of the 35 original productions produced and broadcasted, 80% were in partnership. What is striking is that until 2016 these partnerships were executed with other national companies, but after the acquisition by Viacom CBS, the relationships were established, mostly, with international companies.

Regarding Pol-Ka, it stands out for being the company that produced the largest amount of fiction content in relative terms, holding 21% (47 productions) of the 220 fictions; the relevant figure is that most

of those productions were made individually and it only made coproductions with foreign companies (Disney LA, Turner).

On the other hand, public entities or agencies appear as the main financiers of serialized fiction audiovisual productions, mainly generating conditions for the participation of production companies with little or no background in the audiovisual market. In this sense, it is noteworthy that from 2011 to 2015, the largest number of productions was conceived through a series of contests promoted through the INCAA. In those years, 63 audiovisual pieces were broadcast as a result of these contests (19 carried out by production companies with a track record and 44 made by production companies with little or no track record); this implies more than 28% over the total number of fictions accounted for the period 2011-2020.

Likewise, in the 2016-2020 stage, there were fewer fictions co-financed by public entities or organizations, and none linked to State-driven contests. This is explained by the shift in communication policies since the change in the leadership of the national government in December 2015, which implied a drastic reduction of State participation in the financing of serial fiction projects⁶ (Carboni & Rivero, 2021; Nicolosi, 2021).

In the next section, we will analyze the main fictions broadcast in the last ten years and we will consider their themes in relation to their key national and/or universal aspects as a condition for expansion outside the domestic market and interaction with international production companies.

SERIAL FICTION, BETWEEN STORIES AND PRODUCTION COMPANIES

Considering the topics addressed by the 100 most watched national premiere fictions in the decade analyzed (top 10 of each year), we find that only 14 productions deal with issues strongly anchored in “national issues”. Among the remaining 86 fictions, there are diverse situations. The common denominator in this second group is the presence of

⁶ 2011-2015: Presidency of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner; 2015-2019: Presidency of Mauricio Macri.

universal themes, a wide predominance of the police genre, especially in series coproduced with international agents, and stories of classic melodramatic format with an emphasized stereotyping. This does not mean the absolute absence of local references, but these generally appear as coded winks that bring into play what is local without resigning the effort of internationalization. That is to say, the elements that most clearly appeal to an “Argentine us” are not structuring elements in the stories and are surrounded by elements that are sufficiently universal to allow their consumption in international markets. Humor includes elements and references that are difficult to understand beyond national borders, which is why it is common for sitcoms to be adapted and versioned in importing markets.

Local issues in the background

As mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, of the total number of fictions selected for the study, only 14% of the productions analyzed in this article include local and national issues in their plots. These are combined with political, cultural, socio-productive, artistic and social aspects, among which marginalization and organized crime stand out. These aspects can be seen in Table 2, which presents the aforementioned works with their synopses.

As can be seen in the table, the productions that emphasize local themes are mostly miniseries. In five of them, some entity of the National State provides financing: *Fronteras* (2015), *Historia de un Clan* (2015), *El Marginal* (2016), *El Marginal 2* (2018), *El Marginal 3* (2019); in six others, national producers intervene: *El Puntero* (2011), *Entre Canibales* (2015), *La Leona* (2016), *Un Gallo para Esculapio* (2017), *Sandro de América* (2018), *Argentina, Tierra de Amor y Venganza* (2019); and in just three there are international producers involved: *El Lobista* (2018), *El Tigre Verón* (2019) and *Los Internacionales* (2020). In these last three cases, both in production and distribution, the reiteration of themes linked to violence, marginalization, organized crime and corruption is verified, issues with which Latin America is frequently thematized (Aprea et al., 2019). However, the direct involvement of international agents in the development of products with these themes is low compared to the total (3 out of 14), which partially disputes the idea that

TABLE 2
PREMIERE NATIONAL FICTION WITH A PREDOMINANCE OF LOCAL THEMES (2011-2020)⁷

Title, format, year and channel of release	Producers	Local themes
<i>El Puntero</i> (Series, 2011, El Trece)	Local audiovisual major (Pol-Ka)	The fiction is set in a humble neighborhood in Argentina where an intermediary (known locally as “punter”) between the population and the local political class traffics small favors for his constituents and positions himself as a leader of his community. It exhibits a mostly negative portrayal of these usual actors in the country’s social assistance policies. The fiction was released in an election year.
<i>Historia de un Clan</i> (Miniseries, 2015, Telefe)	Public entity and national audiovisual production company with a track record (Underground)	It is a drama based on the true story of the Puccio family, who, under the guise of a model upper-class family, kidnapped people around them. It is set in the early post-dictatorship years. The father and leader of the criminal gang had been a former official of the Military Dictatorship (1976-1983), who became an unemployed labor force after the return of Democracy.

⁷ This list is mostly made up of works whose central themes clearly refer to “the national / Argentine”, and others where this reference is clear for an Argentine viewer, but which could also be considered “local” in other Latin American countries, to the extent that they address common issues, as is the case of *El Lobista* (2018).

Title, format, year and channel of release	Producers	Local themes
<i>Fronteras</i> (Miniseries, 2015, Telefe)	Public entity and national audiovisual production company with a track record (Zoelle)	It is a miniseries that focuses on the life of doctors in the province of Misiones in Argentina, a border region where the main patients are inhabitants of aboriginal areas. It portrays the inequities in access to quality health care in certain regions of the country, among other local issues.
<i>Entre Canibales</i> (Telenovela, 2015, Telefe)	Local audiovisual major (Telefe) and national audiovisual production company with a track record (100 Bares)	It tells the story of a woman from the province of Neuquén in Argentina, who after being raped as a teenager travels to Buenos Aires in search of revenge. The protagonist finds that her victimizers are now powerful men in national politics.
<i>La Leona</i> (Telenovela, 2016, Telefe)	Local audiovisual major (Telefe) and national audiovisual production company with a track record (El Árbol)	It tells the story of a textile factory on the verge of bankruptcy where its protagonist leads a movement to prevent the emptying of the factory by its owners and promotes the formation of a workers' cooperative that will take charge of its management and prevent layoffs.
<i>El Marginal</i> (Miniseries, 2016, TV Pública)	Public entity and national audiovisual production company with a track record (Underground)	A policeman enters a prison undercover to find the teenage daughter of a judge, kidnapped by a mafia gang of prisoners and jailers. Each episode reiterates the pattern of confrontation between gangs within the prison, and the background of corruption and decadence of the Argentine prison and judicial system. The mannerisms of the main characters together with the music and other stylistic decisions make it a series with a strong local anchorage.

Title, format, year and channel of release	Producers	Local themes
<i>Un gallo para Esculapio</i> (2017, Miniseries, Telefe)	Local audiovisual major (Telefe) and national audiovisual production company with a track record (Underground)	A humble young man from the province of Misiones in Argentina travels to Greater Buenos Aires to find his missing brother. In his mission he meets corrupt and sinister characters. The accent of the Litoral region of Argentina used by its protagonist, the real scenarios of the province of Buenos Aires and the treatment of certain social problems, make it a series of strong local identification.
<i>Sandro de América</i> (Miniseries, 2018, Telefe)	Local audiovisual major (Telefe) and national audiovisual production company with a track record (<i>The Magic Eye</i>)	It portrays the musical career of the popular Argentine artist Sandro, throughout three stages of his life, from his beginnings to the end of his days. The significance of the singer and his music for the national culture give the series a clear local imprint.
<i>El Marginal 2</i> (Miniseries, 2018, TV Pública)	Public entity and national audiovisual production company with a track record (Underground)	(See <i>El Marginal</i>).
<i>El Lobista</i> (Miniseries, 2018, El Trece)	Local audiovisual major (Pol-Ka) and international audiovisual production company (TNT)	It portrays the story of an unscrupulous and unpunished lobbyist who works to benefit the companies that hire him. The series narrates a corrupt articulation between politics and local businessmen, in a universe where politicians, businessmen and judges coexist.

Title, format, year and channel of release	Producers	Local themes
<i>Argentina Tierra de Amor y Venganza</i> (Telenovela, 2019, El Trece)	Local audiovisual major (Pol-Ka)	Period telenovela set in Argentina in the 1930s, a prosperous time for the country when it was the recipient of migratory waves from Central and Eastern European countries. The plot is set in the classic melodrama around a betrayal and the search for revenge.
<i>El Marginal 3</i> (Miniseries, 2019, TV Pública)	Public entity and national audiovisual production company with a track record (Underground)	(See <i>El Marginal</i>).
<i>El Tigre Verón</i> (Miniseries, 2019, El Trece)	Local audiovisual major (Pol-Ka) and international audiovisual production company (TNT)	It portrays the personal life and family environment of a corrupt, extortive, violent and arrogant union leader who is stalked by the justice system. The protagonist exhibits in his office a bust of former Argentine president Juan Domingo Perón, a clear allusion to the historical link between trade unionism, portrayed in a negative light, and the Peronist party.
<i>Los Internacionales</i> (Miniseries, 2020, Telefe)	Local audiovisual major (Telefe), public entity and international audiovisual production company (The Mediapro Studio, Spain)	Framed in the Argentine economic, political and social crisis of 2001, a time when, motivated by distrust in the banking system, thousands of people kept their money, jewelry and other valuables in their homes. This is seen as an opportunity by a gang of thieves who enter homes to steal.

Source: The authors.

peripheral countries of the global South such as Argentina are exporters of one-dimensional narratives that portray their most problematic social and political aspects. A different issue, which goes beyond the scope of this article, is the original production or licensing of national content by, for example, global platforms such as Netflix, whose catalog requires an exhaustive study to identify the type of themes that predominate in the products that the company produces or acquires in Latin American countries for distribution in the international market.

Is fiction with universal themes a synonym of content for export?

On the other hand, as it was pointed out, 86 of the 100 most watched fictions of the decade analyzed deal with universal themes common in television serialized fiction, which do not explicitly refer to a specific national context. Except for the origin of the production companies and the star system on screen, there are very few elements that allow placing fictions as an Argentine product. This is true regardless of the type of producing agent that has managed the project.

In the unitary series *El hombre de tu vida* (Telefe, 2011), the production with the highest audience that year, the female protagonist runs an agency in charge of finding the ideal man for every woman who requests her services. The format was sold to Chile and Spain, while HBO bought it for distribution in Latin America. *Malparida*, *Los únicos* and *Herederos de una Venganza* (El Trece, Pol-ka, 2011), big bets of Argentina's main fiction production company for that year, also deal with universal themes without identity features that refer to the local.

Graduados (Telefe / Underground, 2012), the most watched fiction that year, contained universal elements typical of the classic telenovela: friendship, unrequited love, secrets and betrayals. The format was sold for adaptation to countries such as Chile (Chilevision); Mexico (TV Azteca); Colombia (RCN); Brazil (Bandeirantes), Greece and Serbia. The second most watched fiction of 2012, *Dulce Amor* (Telefe, LCA Producciones, 2012), a classic melodrama in which a powerful businesswoman falls in love with her chauffeur, was sold for adaptation to Chile (*El amor lo manejo yo*, TVN); Mexico (*Hasta el fin del mundo*, Televisa) and Colombia (*Dulce Amor*, RCN).

In 2013, the daily series *Mis amigos de siempre* (El Trece / Pol-ka, 2013) was the only fiction of that year that incorporated elements

of neighborhood costumbrismo, and managed to be among the most watched but with a moderate success in the local market. For its part, the supernatural-themed *Aliados* (Telefe / Cris Morena Group, 2013) had a cold reception in Argentina but was distributed by Fox in Latin America and reached other markets where previously successful series of the same production company had been.

Viudas e Hijos del Rock & Roll (Telefe / Underground, 2014) was the most watched fiction of the year. A comedy on universal themes and evocation of adolescence that, from its production, refers to the mythical band *Viuda e Hijas de Roque Enroll*, an Argentine rock band, emblematic of national rock in the eighties. It is one of the few Underground fictions in the period analyzed without circulation in the international market.

Señores Papis (Telefe, 2014) addressed the issues related to modern parenthood and, although in Argentina it was the fifth most watched fiction of the year, it was versioned in Chile (*Señores Papis*, Mega, 2016); Mexico (*Muy Padres*, Imagen Televisión, 2017); Peru (*Señores Papis*, América TV, 2019), Serbia, Slovakia and Poland.

In 2015, the sitcom *Esperanza Mia* (El Trece, Pol-ka, 2015) was the most watched fiction of the year. The series, which tells the story of a young woman who must hide in a convent and pose as a novice to preserve her safety, was distributed by Dori Media to countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Israel, Spain, Poland, Bolivia and Hungary. Also in 2016 it was broadcast by Chilevision (Chile, with dubbing into Chilean Spanish), by Latina Televisión in Peru (2017) and MTV Latinoamérica. In this case, in addition to the attractiveness of the format and universal themes, we have the popularity, then on the rise, of its protagonist, the actress and singer Lali Espósito, in some of those markets.

Educando a Nina (Telefe / Underground, 2016) incorporates Argentine popular music and characters who speak with an accent from a particular region of the country. These marks of locality are not structural elements so they did not hinder its remakes in countries such as Mexico (*Educando a Nina*, 2018, TV Azteca) or Chile (*Gemelas*, 2019, Chilevisión).

Amar después de Amar (Telefe Contenidos, 2017) is a classic melodrama, successful in its local market and broadcast in Chile

(Chilevisión, 2017), Hispanic United States (Univisión, 2017/2018), and with remakes in Mexico (*Caer en la tentación*, 2018, Televisa), Spain (*El Nudo*, 2018, Antena 3) and Portugal (*Amar depois de Amar*, 2019, TVI).

In 2018, the fiction *100 días para enamorarse* (Telefe / Underground, 2018) was the most watched fiction that year, merging romantic comedy with a wide range of social issues, such as inclusivity, school and street bullying, transsexuality, diversity in the composition of families, homosexuality, divorce, drugs and alcohol, and teenage relationships. The telenovela has been adapted with the same name in Chile (Mega, 2019), Colombia (Caracol, announced in 2021), and the Hispanic United States (Telemundo, 2020). The version produced by Telemundo for the Hispanic market in that country is also distributed by Netflix.

Finally, *Pequeña Victoria* (Telefe, The Mediapro Studio and Viacom, 2019) the second most watched fiction of the year, addressed surrogacy, new maternity and transsexuality. The series had a sequel that takes place six years after the original story, produced by Prime Video.

This review on the themes of the most watched serialized fictions in Argentina in the last decade shows that the circulation of Argentine contents (in original versions or adaptations) beyond national borders does not require or is not limited by the approach of local themes. The data analyzed seem to indicate that the fictions with greater projection in international markets are those that deal with universal themes with local elements incorporated into the narrative in a subaltern or peripheral way.

However, the results do not exclude the possibility of the appearance of some products that achieve circulation in the region, regardless of their local anchorage, for example the miniseries *Sandro de América* (Telefe, The Magic Eye and General Video, 2018), which portrays the rise to popularity and events in the life of a popular Argentine singer as a dramatic biopic, was broadcast in Colombia (Caracol), Ecuador (Teleamazonas), Chile (Canal 13) and Peru (América TV). On the contrary, other contents such as *El Puntero* (El Trece, Pol-ka, 2011) set in impoverished peripheral urban areas, is identified as a product clearly located in Argentina due to the presence of idioms, neighborhood slang and popular chants. This fact seems to have limited the international

circulation of the product since it has not been screened on international channels and there have been no remakes in other countries.

A different issue, which exceeds the goals of this work, is the globalization of national fiction, understood as a more complex modality than internationalization. This problem, which, as Ortiz (1997) points out, entails the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services organized on the basis of a world strategy and directed towards a world market, may be a line to be investigated in future research.

Co-production strategies and the thematic hybridization of fictions

In this last stage, we will briefly review the main productions resulting from alliances between national audiovisual production companies (particularly the two companies we have identified in this article as Majors) and international production companies. This will allow us to demonstrate that the presence of foreign capital in production and distribution gives rise to the creation of works that address both universal themes, generally under the police genre, as well as others with a strong local anchorage containing the aforementioned stereotypes about Latin America.

Signos (El Trece / Pol-ka and Turner, 2011), a co-production between the local company Pol-ka and Turner, was the first outcome of this alliance that would allow the premiere in the following years of some highly technical series, broadcasted by the Argentine channel and for all Latin America by TNT, a pay TV signal owned by Turner. *Signos* portrays the story of a serial killer who bases his crimes on superstitions linked to the signs of the zodiac. *La Fragilidad de los cuerpos* (El Trece / Pol-ka and Turner, 2017), also a result of this partnership, tells the story of a journalist who decides to investigate a purported suicide. *El Maestro* (El Trece / Pol-ka and Turner, 2017) tells the story of a ballet legend turned dance teacher in a neighborhood club. *El Lobista* (El Trece / Pol-ka and Turner, 2018) thematizes corporate pressures on political power, corruption and impunity. *El Tigre Verón* (El Trece / Pol-ka and Turner, 2019 and 2021) delves into the world of unionism and its tensions with media, judicial and political powers. In its scenarios, it is possible to recognize features that refer to the Argentine reality. The unitary series *Otros Pecados* (El Trece / Pol-ka and Turner, 2019)

addresses in each episode a case in which the characters are victims of manipulation, resentment, jealousy or naivety. The series *Tu parte del trato* (El Trece / Pol-ka and Turner, 2019) narrates a criminal pact between two strangers.

To those mentioned, in the case of productions that emphasize the local, we can add *Un Gallo para Esculapio* (Telefe, Underground/Boga Bogagna/INCAA, 2017) aired by TNT for Latin America. The series shows neighborhood violence, marginalization, poverty and internal migrations in Argentina. The real scenarios where it was filmed clearly refer to impoverished areas of the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires and the main protagonist imposes a tone typical of the Argentine litoral. In the same vein we can mention *Historia de un clan* (Telefe / Underground, 2015), the second most watched fiction of that year, based on the real case of a family that formed a criminal organization in the eighties to kidnap, torture, extort and murder people. The series, which is set in the final days of the last Argentine military dictatorship, was broadcast by TNT for Latin America and was available on Netflix in 2017-2020. Meanwhile, *El Marginal* (TV Pública and Underground, 2016, 2018 and 2019) is a prison-themed series that crudely portrays life in an Argentine prison, and shows situations of physical violence, murders, kidnappings and internal mafias involving inmates and prison staff. The series was successfully broadcast on Argentina's TV Pública and licensed to Netflix, which distributes it globally.

In the last point we will establish a series of reflections and conclusions referred to the intertwining between the structure of the Argentine serialized fiction market and the recurrent themes.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this article was to systematize the broadcasting of serialized fiction productions on open television in Buenos Aires, Argentina, during the period 2011-2020, in order to evaluate both the conditions of existence of the national market and to establish a dialogue between the productive structure and the recurring themes and narratives in the fiction programs with the highest audience during that period. Likewise, we sought to trace the relations between local

audiovisual production companies and large international production companies.

Among the main results, it stands out that of the 220 fictions registered between 2011-2020, more than 60% were made by television audiovisual production companies either individually (34.5%), in co-production between national companies (11.3%) or with international production companies (16.8%), while the remaining percentage were contents made by different organizations or public entities in co-production with audiovisual production companies of different sizes.

As we have explained, for the analysis we have focused on the ten most watched fictions of each year studied. This implies some reflections: in the first place, most of those contents were broadcast on *Telefe* and *El Trece* channels, which have the highest audience, leaving out *TV Pública*, and with it, most of the fiction proposals broadcast by the public channel, which were those financed with public funds. It is possible that other issues have emerged from its evaluation.

Our analysis shows that the Argentine fictions most commercialized abroad, either by their reproduction in original version or by their adaptation, show that the presence of “local” (Argentine) elements in the original version does not represent a decisive aspect. Complementarily, of the 100 most watched fictions, 86 focused on universal themes common in television serialized fiction and were produced by national companies. This allows us to assert the non-existence of a linear relationship between the presence of foreign capital in production and the greater globalization of the topics addressed in fictions or the loss of local elements. On the contrary, it is possible to find examples in which fictions made in co-production with foreign companies (generally pay TV signals) chose the local as a preferential theme. But identical alliances also give rise to products without a defined geographical reference.

Based on the above, the ownership structure of the agents involved in the production of fictions seems to be a variable that by itself does not directly affect the depth and type of “local” presence in the plots. Fictions are not more “local” for having been produced by national companies, nor do they cease to be so for having foreign capital participation, at least as far as their subject matter is concerned.

Finally, in the series resulting from the partnership between the main production companies and their foreign capital counterparts, there is both the presence of local elements that refer to the Argentine social and political reality (*El Tigre Verón*, *El Lobista*) and other productions where the national reference is diluted. In any case, the common denominator among these fictions is their belonging to the police genre, which allows for more elaborated plots both in the development of their characters and in the temporal resources. This allows not only a greater appeal to heterogeneous audiences in different markets, but also the possibility of expanding the narrative universe of the series in new seasons by retaking and expanding some of the many edges of the detective story. In other cases (*Un Gallo para Esculapio*, *Historia de un clan* or *El Marginal*), it is observed that the presence of local elements acts as a catalyst that makes the product more attractive for international distribution, but from a narrative that reinforces a specific imagery about Latin America that portrays it as a territory of corruption, organized crime, mafias, exclusion and insecurity.

As we have noted, in several of the productions examined there is a tendency for products originally broadcast on open television to be absorbed by digital audiovisual platforms. In turn, the latter promote new seasons or remakes of Latin American classics that were once successful on the television screen. We wonder, then, who are the heirs of the vanguard of serialized fiction in Argentina and Latin America, the guardians of the stories and the symbolic capital.

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