What *El cor de la ciutat* (2000-2009) talks about. A study of the social agenda of Catalan television's longest serial

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Abstract

From a detailed analysis of the 1,906 episodes of El cor de la ciutat, the daily serial broadcast by TV3 (Televisió de Catalunya) on afternoon prime time from 2000 to 2009, this article summarises some of the results. In addition to the specific methodological design, we investigate the main narrative strategies regarding the introduction and approach to social issues in fiction. We also identify the agenda of the most relevant social issues the serial has presented to its audience for their consideration. There are three thematic clusters: social conflict, groups at risk of marginalisation and social policy-making.

Key words
TV serial, fiction, social issues, social problems, thematic agenda, Televisió de Catalunya.

Resum

A partir de l'anàlisi exhaustiva dels 1.906 capítols d'El cor de la ciutat, serial diari de prime time de tarda emès per TV3 (Televisió de Catalunya) del 2000 al 2009, aquest article resumeix part dels resultats obtinguts. A més del disseny metodològic específic, presentem una aproximació a les principals estratègies narratives d'introducció i de plantejament dels temes socials en la ficció. I identifiquem l'agenda dels temes d'interès social més rellevants que el serial ha posat a la consideració de la seva audiència. Els nuclis temàtics són tres: la conflictivitat social, els col·lectius amb risc d'exclusió i la definició de polítiques socials.

Paraules clau
Serial televisiu, ficció, tema d'interès social, problema social, agenda temàtica, Televisió de Catalunya.

1. Introduction

The field of analysis of soap operas and TV drama serials assumes that the repertory of social issues and problems introduced by the fiction discourses is based on their prior definition within the context of production and reception (Kottak 1991; Ramos 1997; Buonanno 1999; O'Donnell 1999; V. de Lopes 2002; Henderson 2007). Far from an objectivist point of view, the definition of *social problem* is subject to the activity of public demand through which attention is focused on certain social conditions and a problem is situated in a particular perspective from which it is necessary to understand it; i.e. certain aspects of it are emphasised, its causes are localised (attribution of responsibilities) and a solution is recommended for it, often exemplified by means of cases. The *framing* through cultural acceptance of Hertog and McLeod (2001) or the so-called *typifying of the nature of the problem* (Best 1988) therefore become an integral part of the social construction of problems.

From an interpretative perspective, reality, as a social product, leads us to contemplate the world constructed intersubjectively through its representations in the interactions of social actors (Schutz 2003/1974; Berger and Luckmann 2001/1966). According to Buonanno (1999, 2004), experi-

ence is divided into stratifications of the worlds of life, the world of fiction being one more status of reality, superimposed and in interaction with the world of everyday life.

Following the precepts of the consensual view of communication of James Carey (1988), the definition of television as a central storyteller (Newcomb 1999), the bases of television studies (Fiske and Hartley 1978) and cultural psychology (Bruner 2004), the Italian sociologist describes TV fiction as the modern bard (a story *of* and *for us*) with which we domesticate what is unexpected or we become familiar with other possible realities, all helping to maintain the community. It becomes especially significant to observe how the maintenance of the community is not exclusively restricted to a sense of conservation but also involves the role of TV fiction as a promoter and/or catalyst of social change when this places current problems within the framework of consolidated experiences.

In this respect, soap operas and TV drama serials have been described as a privileged forum of debate and/or repertory of themes (and specifically of social issues) in accordance with their serialised structure, the many different points of view and their referentiality. Authors such as Henderson (2007) and Livingstone (1990) in the Anglo-Saxon sphere and Ramos (1997) and V. de Lopes *et al.* (2002) in Latin America agree in attributing to television serials the capacity to facilitate

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understanding of certain social issues rather than determining consensus about them.

So, although accepting the hypothesis that TV fiction is fed, with regard to the themes and the social issues it presents, from social and media discourses (preferably news) of its environment, we are interested in observing which themes are presented as social issues or, in their definition of conflict, as social problems about which we must think and/or act, through the themes as a whole proposed by the Catalan serial in question, namely *El cor de la ciutat* (2000-2009). Therefore, *a priori*, we will look at all those themes tackled in *El cor de la ciutat* that might have a public or social dimension in the contemporary Catalan context, from drug addiction to care work, for example, when these are represented as objects of public discourse, both through the communicative action of political institutions and also the rest of social agents, among which themes we distinguish those presented as social issues or problems within the serial.

2. *El cor de la ciutat:* audiovisual product and text

El cor de la ciutat is the only afternoon serial produced by Televisió de Catalunya in-house as an open serial; i.e. without an initially planned end, which exceeded 1,900 episodes and 9 years of broadcast.[1] It started on 11 September 2000 and ended on the night of 23 December 2009, which was its tenth and last season by way of an epilogue, as it is composed of a single block of 75 episodes instead of the usual 200.

Like most fiction produced in-house by Televisió de Catalunya, *El cor de la ciutat* is a production aimed at domestic consumption with a strongly marked national identity at the level of representation (regional, linguistic and cultural references, particularly) (Castelló 2005). It remained audience leader in its time slot, namely early afternoon (from 15.40 to 16.20, approximately), although in absolute terms it gradually lost followers over time, especially during the last four years.[2]

El cor de la ciutat is divided into seasons that follow the school year. The episodes last approximately 30 minutes and were broadcast with a single advertising break. Over the nine years the serial was broadcast, it was preceded by the lunchtime news and weather (*Telenotícies migdia, El temps*) and a cookery programme (*Cuines*), while the magazine programme that completed the afternoon's programming varied.[3]

The professional routines implemented by the Drama Department of Televisió de Catalunya over the last fifteen years have helped to make the production process for serialised fiction more responsive and to define *El cor de la ciutat* as a text that is permeable to the circumstances of contemporary public opinion and to the complaints or preferences expressed by the audience, as noted by Ortega (2002). Distance in time is minimal with regard to viewers and this means they can be taken into account in the final production of the text. Although this does not result in a dynamic of plot interference, it does rein-

force certain mechanisms of permeability in constructing dialogues and contemporary contextual references (Castelló and López 2007).

We must also remember that Televisió de Catalunya, in addition to being subject to the need to make a profit, is also a broadcaster with a clear social vocation. The production team pays particular attention to the serial's impact in the press and often establishes a dialogue with Catalan institutions, groups, associations and other social agents represented in some way (that can be identified with or resemble those of the series) (Ortega 2002; Castelló 2005).

On the other hand, *El cor de la ciutat* became, right from the start, the object of discourse on the part of Televisió de Catalunya itself by means of various sections in the afternoon magazine programme and through special broadcasts of media events generated around the popular viewing of the last episode of each season. Aspects were tackled in all these entertainment spaces that were related to conditioning factors in both narrative and production terms, as well as debates on the content covered. Generally, these debates were related to Catalan society; i.e. discursive spaces where the time periods from the serial are transferred to the forum of public debate. This promotional task, of symbiotic benefit for the serial and channel, was complemented with use of the internet as a vehicle to create and reinforce virtual interpretative communities.

The world represented in *El cor de la ciutat* is located geographically in the Barcelona district of Sant Andreu and, temporarily, in Sants. Its desire to be realistic is also accentuated in the time dimension, as it follows the line already set by *Poblenou* and represents a continual present in parallel with that of the broadcast context. The characters grow with the viewer and each episode summarises one day, summer being a break in time for the diegesis (*unrecorded existence*, Geraghty 1981). The use of time distortion (biographical analepsis, prolepsis and ellipsis) is extremely sporadic.[4]

In general terms, the predominant type of plot in the serial has a variable duration between the season and broader narrative cycles, as well as blocks of plots, which means that stories can be alternated between the Christmas or Easter breaks. *El cor de la ciutat* uses a narrative structured around situations of dialogue-based interactions in which action, although not completely excluded, is clearly minimised (concentrated into the final episodes aimed at evening prime time).

The serial is based on a polycentric protagonism in which various individuals from the middle classes, self-employed people and employees,[5] located in the same urban context, are grouped together in family clusters or via social relations (love, friendship, neighbours and employment). From the complex web of paradigmatic relations, many different, simultaneous and interwoven stories are structured that, following a strict definition of the model of *community soap* (Liebes and Livingstone 1998), would be developed in a parallel and non-hierarchical way. Here we need to introduce some fine distinctions.

On the one hand, the serial's starting point would seem to be

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marked by a certain protagonism of the character of Clara Bosch, whose coming out of prison became the trigger for many of the stories that transform the initial situation of the neighbourhood.[6] But the centrality of the Bosch-Vidal family cluster is gradually diluted and the protagonism of the female character loses all validity as from the second season.

In fact, the alternating of relative weight from one character to another as the serial progresses means we can isolate three family clusters with the most protagonism: Bosch-Vidal, Peris-Noguera and Borràs-Crespo. All three are made up of characters that remain from the beginning of the serial, especially the Peris-Noguera family, who formed the basis of a change in setting, and give rise to the most important stories, both in terms of presence (relative time dedicated during the season) and extent (starring in predominately serial-long plots).[7] The stories conducted by these fixed main characters usually have a greater impact on the general outcome of the diegetic universe and involve a larger number of people (actively or passively). Logically, the relationship with the viewer gains in intensity as the serial advances and is enhanced by a historical and biographical knowledge of the characters.

Apart from these main family clusters, there is a whole number of characters that make up the social backdrop of the serial's universe, some as pure scenery or collective in nature ("neighbouring community") and others as supporting characters that might become central in some plots.

The human panorama is revitalised by introducing new characters using two basic strategies: either the characters are inserted temporarily as more or less independent family clusters (of contained paradigmatic relations, which means they can be replaced at the end of the season) or are integrated as particular individuals with one or more members of the stable battery of characters (which makes it easier for them to become permanent). This play of weights and counterweights in the multi-centred protagonism of *El cor de la ciutat* means that the character structure must be observed season by season.

3. A hybrid serial model

El cor de la ciutat is presented as a serial that takes, as its references, the British soaps that best represent the traditional model of realistic community soaps without losing sight of the differential features of Brazilian soaps and other successful formulas, compared with the US supersoaps, which have also penetrated audience tastes via previous productions.

In spite of the desire to revive the narration of customs of *Poblenou* and to aim for a treatment closer to the British social realism, throughout its history *El cor de la ciutat* has been defined as a hybrid model.

In accordance with the degree of textual coherence between seasons, two stages can be outlined: a *birth stage* (seasons 1, 2, 3 and 4) and a *rebirth stage* (seasons 6, 7 and 8), the last season being a clear exercise in restructuring the diegetic uni-

verse and basic plot lines that have run through the text up to that time. In the middle, we must consider season 5 as a turning point and season 9 as a thematic and narrative transgression that requires an epilogue (season 10) to provide textual coherence to the serial as a whole.

The birth stage achieves a certain equilibrium between the community soap model that wishes to be realistic and the weight of the melodramatic component (love triangle, revelation of secrets, revenge and betrayal, expiation of blame or impossible love stories) that bring it, from time to time, closer to the dynastic model and the classic TV drama serial. The fourth season is undoubtedly the one that is most firmly dedicated to a realistic soap of everyday stories and introduces more controversial social issues.

The interruption is marked by the fifth season, in which Manel Bonany takes over from Maria Jaén as head of plot and redirects the serial along a line of suspense, applying the Benet and Jornet brand and as an aftertaste of the archetypes so well explored in *Nissaga de poder*.

The rebirth stage goes back to the initial strategy with a change in setting (the Peris family move to Sants) and renewing the community of characters, structured into family clusters and common settings (at work or school). In this new cycle the axis of generational relations is also restored, as significant weight is given to stories starring the group of teenagers (between school and the disco) and a new group is created with its own secondary plots, namely the elderly. This stage ends with a return to Sant Andreu and a gradual and clear return to the main family clusters.

Nevertheless, the eighth season suggests the composition of a diegetic universe constructed under new parameters and narrative variations towards a detective and intrigue-based plot. This trend is confirmed in the last exercise: although the structure of fixed family clusters is maintained, the distribution of the plots decreases their specific weight and tends to fragment them. The stories occur within the generational axis, in the settings or spaces, but not unequivocally. Rather they tend to proliferate or involve characters based on various axes.

4. Methodological design

The contextualisation of audiovisual production and a close reading of the serial briefly outlined above help to draw up a descriptive map of the paradigmatic structure of relations that make up the *possible world* offered by the serial in question.

The characters (age, gender, profession), their relations (family, work, love or various social relations) and their relation to the spaces represented are the axes used to detect the organisational structure that serves as the basis for the many different plots that make up each season.

The season is therefore the segment we take as our reference to break the TV serial down lineally, to which we have applied the interpretative schema of Milly Buonanno (*ad hoc* method-

ology of the Osservatorio Sulla Fiction Italiana, OFI). Also noted are the narrative aspects that must be taken into account when ordering the text content as relevant variables to evaluate the formal procedure employed.

Our aim is to delimit the agenda of social issues constructed by *El cor de la ciutat* throughout the time it was broadcast and to evaluate this in terms of presence, recurrence and relevance. We employ content analysis "as research", making the categorisation and variables more flexible rather than structuring or quantifying the data obtained (Casetti and DiChio 1999:246). What is of interest here is to be able to evaluate the firmness or courage with which the serial tackles certain social issues within a season: for example, greater if it does so with a consolidated character in the imaginary of the audience rather than with a new character introduced for this purpose. We move away from a comparison of media content with the real world and from an evaluation of the image of specific social groups, an area that research on television serials using this technique has traditionally focused on.

The question is: which social issues have been proposed as a priority by *El cor de la ciutat* in its agenda? And the initial hypotheses are as follows:

1. *El cor de la ciutat* concentrates its attention on a limited number of social issues which it repeatedly deals with.

2. Social issues in *El cor de la ciutat* are introduced via new characters minimally related to the network of social relations described by the serial.

3. Social issues in *El cor de la ciutat* are not established as long-term plots nor are their protagonists the most leading characters in the possible world described by the serial.

To select the variables, we have used the agenda setting research tradition which is preferably applied, although not exclusively, to news genres (Gifreu et al. 2007; Gifreu and

Gómez 2009) and with regard to the selection of specific variables in fiction, we refer to the work by Geraghty (1991), Strange (2002) and, subsequently, Henderson (2007). Without forgetting the number of studies that deal with the text analysis of serials: from the structuralist work of Dyer et al. (1981) to the socio-semiotic approach to interpretative frameworks of Lacalle (2005, 2008).

Initially, the sample includes the synopsis reconstructed by viewing the 1,906 episodes that make up the entire universe to be analysed. In a first stage, the unit of analysis is the plot or story being told. The analytical categories include the identification of the plot, the protagonist, the theme and the narrative genre (table 1). In this last variable, the default value is drama. We therefore propose to evaluate the components, principally of *comedy* (in the dramatic sense), that may be expressed in some of the plots according to the variable orientation the serial has adopted throughout its history.

Added to this are indicators, on a scale of intervals, throughout the plot: episodic, a medium narrative cycle (minimum of 30 episodes or spread over more than a month and a half of broadcast), a block (approximately 70 episodes, or the quarter between holidays) and serial (the season or continuously). An intermediate value is introduced to identify those stories occurring throughout two of the three blocks into which the season is divided and these sub-segments are employed as localisation indicators – block 1, 2 or 3.

From the results of this initial content analysis we obtained a detailed list of the themes covered by the serial, from which we have selected those related to social issues, which we will analyse in a second phase.

Having arrived at this point, we believe that to predetermine the content analysis categories with regard to the social issues represented would be to move away from our interpretative aim

Table 1. Analytical categorisation: study of narrative plots

Identification	Plot	(Describer: includes predefined subcategories of characters and settings)
	Protagonist	(Describer: character of a predefined relationship for the season)
	Theme	(Describer: issue or problem)
	Genre	Comedy
		Intrigue
		Other (to be defined)
Relative weight	Plot length	Episodic or self-concluding
		Medium narrative cycle (minimum 30 episodes)
		Block (1) (approx. 70 episodes)
		Blocks (2) /70 + 30/70 episodes)
		Serial or continuously
Location	Season (1-10)	Block 1 (from Sept. to Dec.)
		Block 2 (from Jan. to Easter)
		Block 3 (from Easter to July)

Source: Author.

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for the object of the study. We have adopted a classification criterion based on defining the units via key words that allow us to structure the themes by area of incidence or spheres of action, in which variables of gender and age are included (table 2).[8] Regarding the isolated list of social issues, while maintaining the subdivision by season, we have applied a second analytical framework in which, apart from the categories to identify an issue, character, genre, plot or length of plot, we have also introduced those variables used to evaluate the relevance granted to social issues within the serial.

Firstly, we have considered as a variable of prioritisation the specific weight acquired by an issue (unit of analysis) in terms of the time dedicated to it, a dimension via which we propose to go back to the interval-based indicators for plot length and introduce some operational variations to detect continuity over different seasons (table 3).

Secondly, we have looked at the quality of the characters conducting the issues, in accordance with the map of paradigmatic structure produced by season in the preliminary phase. Following Anglo-Saxon studies (Buckingham 1987; Geraghty 1991) we have measured the biographical value of the character as a variable of the viewer's involvement (textual competence) and we have taken into account whether the character is fixed or occasional. We have also used as intermediate values those that allow us to consider the battery of characters

longitudinally. With regard to occasional characters, we have applied what Lacalle (2008) describes as *relation with what is social* and which, in the preceding research, has been defined as *paradigmatic relations in a family, sentimental or socio-labour sphere* (Allen 1985).

Lastly, we have worked with the variable *introduction of social issues* and have considered various indicators for the dimensions of *character* and *narrative variations*. We have thereby noted whether the issue is introduced as a result of changes in the space or time scenario, changes in the social setting (often determined by the appearance of new spaces,

Table 2. Spheres of action

Relations with oneself and others	Health
	Delinquency
Family	Social movements and organisation
Partner relations	Justice
Sexuality	Politics
Love	Religion
Work	Leisure and culture
Economy	Groups at risk

Source: Author.

Table 3. Analytical characterisation: study of thematic agenda

Variables of introduction	Biographical value (accumulated knowledge) of the character	*Occasional*	*One season* *More than one season /alternates* *Introduction to fixed*	
				family
				sentimental
				professional
		Fixed	*Initial clusters*	
			Intermediate seasons	
	Narrative variations	Narrative genre (comedy, other)		
		Temporary scenario (describer)		
		Spatial scenario (describer)		
		Social setting (describer)		
Variables of prioritisation	Plot length	Episodic or short cycle		
		Medium narrative cycle		
		Block (1)		
		Blocks (1) continuously		
		Block (2)		
		Blocks (2) continuously		
		Season		
		Serial continuously		
	Character's specific value in the paradigmatic structure	*Protagonism*	Main	
			Secondary	
			Scenario	

Source: Author.

such as secondary school, which makes education-related issues possible) or changes in narrative genre. In this last case, the changes can deviate from being assigned to some plots to genres of comedy or intrigue, or from the more generalised bias the serial may have from one season to another (renewing the scriptwriting team is an intrinsic feature of the system used to produce this Catalan serial).

We have discounted other variables of an extra-textual nature, such as the reorientation of the serial's target audience or incidences resulting from production factors (terminating actors' contracts or replacing the scriptwriting team, for example).[9]

The dimensions described by the variable *introduction of social issues* are not prescribed as exclusive, since one issue can be covered through a plot starring a fixed character whose development is redirected with new narrative arcs via a change in setting.

In short, this analytical phase, from an agenda setting hypothesis, allows us to isolate those social issues that the serial, as a particular participant in the forum constituted by the television system, currently prioritises on the public agenda of its viewers. In other words, those issues it highlights as relevant, about which we should talk and on which the imaginary should be focused.

Without wishing to contrast genres of fiction and reality, we would like to note here that studies on the effects of *priming* applied to fiction via cognitive psychology show how fiction, like the news, can influence judgements regarding the relative urgency with which (narrated) social problems should be overcome or redressed (Strange 2002:277).

5. Findings: the social issue agenda

So, what does *El cor de la ciutat* talk about? Obviously it talks about interpersonal relations (love, friendship, family) and relations with oneself (identity crisis, grieving, stories of personal triumph). And on these pillars it introduces stories about battling for the custody of children, domestic violence, reaffirming sexual identity, drug addiction and the processes of reinsertion in society.

In accordance with our study's regrouping criteria, the range of relevant social issues in *El cor de la ciutat* can be summarised into three broad lines:

– *social conflict* (delinquency, domestic violence and harassment/bullying),

– *groups at risk of marginalisation* (due to stigma of a legal nature, of sexual identity or gender, illness or disability or socio-economic and cultural reasons in the case of immigrants), and

– *definition of public policies and/or policies of a legal nature* (via socio-health or socio-economic problems, such as unemployment, abortion or the right to a dignified death).

An exploration of the thematic map of *El cor de la ciutat* has also allowed us to isolate the main strategies employed to intro-

duce and present social issues, both within the same season and in a comparison across the seasons:

1.Dual presentation of social issues within a season. The same issue is tackled via two (or more) plots conducted simultaneously by different characters, either interrelated or not. The relevance given to each one can vary (fixed and occasional characters or serial and block-based plots). This strategy means that the narrative treatment of the issues and/or variables of representation can be diversified.

2.Concentration of social issues and problems onto a small number of characters (generally fixed and main) presented in a chain throughout a season, so that the first provides the contextual keys for the others to appear.

3.Recurrence of social issues between seasons with variations in terms of relevance (main/secondary character, serial/block/cycle-based plots) that help to distinguish two applications: *a)* the progressive introduction of social problems that are not consolidated in the TV imaginary and/or generate clear social rejection (e.g. child abuse as suspected in the second season and as an actual reality in the fourth); or *b)* the resonance of social issues introduced as relevant from the start (such as former inmates being reinserted into society).

Returning to the initial hypotheses, the first has been confirmed: *El cor de la ciutat* focuses its attention on a limited number of social issues which it repeatedly covers.

In fact, in presenting social issues with public repercussions, single cases are exceptional: serial rapist, transsexuality, assisted suicide and the squatter movement.

This first social issue corresponds to the fifth season's deviations (from the predominant model), in which intrigue is introduced concerning the identity of the rapist in the neighbourhood, forming the basis for renewing the network of occasional characters as possible suspects. But this is not the only case of rape narrated in *El cor de la ciutat*, although it is the only time this constitutes a relevant issue, both due to the serial-based treatment and the quality and breadth of the network of characters involved via the different victims. Along the same line of deviation from the model we would also place the inclusion of a criminal mafia organisation in the ninth season based on a plot about hiding a corpse. Although this isn't the first time such issues have appeared either, it is the time when they stand out the most.

Transsexuality becomes a notable exception if we take into account that it is the only appearance of gender dysphoria. Considering the treatment it receives in *El cor de la ciutat*, however, it can be easily assimilated into the themes of risk of marginalisation and sexual identity that unify the groups of lesbians, homosexuals, transsexuals and bisexuals in their public demands in Spain.

All have been represented as subjects of the possible world of *El cor de la ciutat* throughout its history through fixed and occasional characters with a differing degree of protagonism. Regarding their presence in plots where relevant social issues

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are defined (by extension, protagonism and recurrence), of note are homosexuality related to the construction of identity in adolescence and homophobic attitudes (table 4). On the other hand, bisexuality has constructed a less relevant issue in plots of love and sexual triangles and the only lesbian couple in *El cor de la ciutat* was involved in an almost episodic plot concerning their breakup and dispute for child custody.

On the other hand, although we can group assisted suicide together with other themes related to health and preparing to die, and we can find prior dialogue-based incursions or similar situations and plots, this is a social issue covered relevantly on just one occasion.[11] As with the squatter movement (this being with new characters), it is configured via a serial-based development that involves quite a wide network of characters, either through a complex link between the protagonists with the neighbourhood community or how it affects the neighbourhood as a group.

The four social issues highlighted here are characterised by the high degree of controversy they generate within the social context of producing and receiving *El cor de la ciutat*, i.e. the contemporary Catalan society in which they circulate as media discourses. Clear references for all of them can be found in news items that have either been located in sections on incidents, society and politics in the contemporary press (such as the rapist of the Eixample neighbourhood in Barcelona or the removal of squatters in recent years),[12] or have become the object of claims for public attention to promote changes in the legal or medical situation (the definition of transsexuality, the

right to a dignified death or how to deal with serial rapists are some examples of this).[13]

In contrast to this initial reflection, both the second and third hypotheses formulated regarding the relevance given by the serial to social issues have been rejected, since the variables of *introduction* and *specific weight* of the plots are not valid for the whole.

We have therefore established what might be described as a contained and prudent commitment to social issues in *El cor de la ciutat* with regard to how they are introduced, which cannot be generalised in all cases.

Second hypothesis: Social issues in *El cor de la ciutat* are introduced via new characters minimally linked to the network of social relations described by the serial.

As we have explained above, most of the social issues in *El cor de la ciutat* are covered on more than one occasion. Consequently, in grouping and comparing the most relevant cases, the findings point to a combination of plots where the theme is introduced via occasional or new characters with plots conducted by fixed characters, main and/or secondary, connected to the community network of the diegetic world. This system is shared by all highlighted themes except for those in which offences against sexual indemnity, life and public health allow a stable pattern to be fixed, exclusively introduced by new characters.[14]

Third hypothesis: Social issues in *El cor de la ciutat* are not established as long-running plots nor do they involve the most

Table 4. Homosexuality and risk of marginalisation

Theme	Highlighted cases (chronological order)		
	Season	Protagonist	Length
Definition of sexual identity (adult) Temporary heterosexual relationship (girlfriend)	1 2	Occasional (scenario) *Lluís "El Fato"*	Medium cycle (episod. S. 1)
Definition of sexual identity (adolescent) Self-confirmation and acceptance in peer group	3	Fixed (main) *Max Carbó*	2 blocks
Homophobia in the family sphere (adolescent) Rejection of stepfather: psychological illness	4	Fixed (main) *Max Carbó*	Medium cycle
Homophobia in the family sphere (young adult) Acceptance of biological father	6	Fixed (main) *Max Carbó*	Episodic
Definition of sexual identity (adolescent) Refusal, crisis, personal and social acceptance	7	Occasional S. 7-8 (secondary) *Enric Viadé*	Medium cycle
Homophobia - peer group (adolescent/young adult) (double case: physical aggression)	7	Occasional S. 7-8 (secondary) *Enric Viadé*	Medium cycle
Homophobia in the family sphere Rejection of father versus grandfather	7 8	Occasional S. 7-8 (secondary) *Enric Viadé*	Medium cycle (episod. S. 8)

Source: Author.

prominent characters in the possible world described by the serial.

The third hypothesis would be rejected from the moment that almost all the cases detected in the analysis segmented by season respond positively to the variable *relevance of plot length*. In other words, they last one or two blocks and even throughout the serial. Medium cycle plots tend to correspond to social issues that are doubled up within the season or follow a strategy of using many cases throughout the serial.

Among the former there is the first season's double representation of former prison inmates getting back into society and the relapse in the consumption of opiates, which are concentrated on the occasional character of Lali Carbó, as a replica of fixed characters' successful processes or, in similar terms, with regard to the attitude of personal sacrifice for the good of the children, namely the relapsed drug addicts of the epilogue, Íngrid and David Peris (table 5).

With regard to those cases of thematic recurrence between seasons, we note the progressive introduction of social issues such as alcoholism or child abuse, often supported by a strategy to concentrate social problems onto one character.

On the other hand, the resonance of social issues dealt with throughout the serial, returned to in short plots, applies in the case of former prison inmates getting back into society (seasons 1 and 7) and school bullying (seasons 6 and 9), although this is a frequent mechanism because, as we have already mentioned, it means that aspects of the treatment can be diversified

(maternity versus abortion) or new variants introduced (such as gender-based violence or teenage alcoholism) (table 6).

We have only isolated two problems exclusively in medium cycle plots: sexual harassment and homophobia in the family or peer group, often as a complement to the plot regarding the definition of sexual identity in adolescence, while the two cases detected treated via a short or almost episodic cycle (xenophobia and extortion at work) are included in the epigraph *immigration* in opposing directions (local to immigrant and vice versa).

With regard to the *protagonism* variable, we should note once again that the recurrence observed for the most relevant cases suggests the alternation of fixed characters, main or secondary, and occasional characters.

5. Conclusions

Contrary to our initial hypotheses, the thematic agenda of *El cor de la ciutat* indicates a constant and highlighted presence of social issues.

On the one hand, we note that the serial's characteristic recurrence of themes is due to strategies to introduce and present social issues aimed at facilitating their diversified treatment within the season. On the other, we have isolated two further characteristics of the serial: a manifest concern for emerging problems in Catalan public debate and constant attention paid to more consolidated issues in the social imaginary.

Table 5. Drug addiction (1)

Theme	Cases highlighted (chronological order)		
	Season	Protagonist	Length
Recidivism of drug addict (adult) (heroin) Former inmate, failed re-insertion: overdose	1	Occasional (secondary) *Lali Carbó*	Medium cycle
Recidivism of drug addict (adult) (heroin) Identity crisis. Achieved clinical rehabilitation (family support)	1	Fixed (main) *Jordi Vidal*	Block
Drug consumption in adolescence Early detection (family). Psychological treatment (causes)	1	Fixed (main) *Núria Vidal*	Medium cycle
Young drug addict (pills) (risks) Depression. Failed medical rehabilitation, overcome with family support	4	Fixed (main) *Marta Vendrell*	2 blocks
Young drug addict (pills) (stigma) Depression. Represented withdrawal: overcome with family support	7	Fixed (main) *Juani Galiana*	2 blocks
Recidivism of drug addict (opiates) (pregnant) Gives up the baby. Failed second chance. But recovers maternal instinct.	10	Occasional (secondary) *Íngrid*	Medium cycle
Recidivism of drug addict (cocaine) (*) Relapse. Consequences (family, work). Second chance via paternal love	10	Fixed (main) *David Peris*	Serial (epilogue: single block)

Source: Author.

Table 6. Drug addiction (2). Alcoholism

	Cases highlighted (chronological order)		
Theme	**Season**	**Protagonist**	**Length**
Alcohol abuse (temporary) Widow (grief) who loses custody of her daughter	2	Fixed (secondary) *Mari Esteve*	Block
Alcoholism (depression). Homeless person with relapse after reinserted in society. Clinical rehabilitation (not represented)	2 3	Occasional S. 2-3 (secondary) *Iolanda*	Medium cycle (2 alternate)
Alcoholism (depression). Family consequences and social risks. Rehabilitation in family not fully successful (leaves)	3	Fixed (main) *Quim Noguera*	Serial-season
Alcoholism (depression). Consequences for health (death by cirrhosis)	6	Occasional S. 2-6 (secondary) *Andreu Ferrero*	Block
Alcoholism and adolescence. Late detection (family underestimation). Consequences for health (ethylic coma). Clinical rehabilitation (not represented)	10	Fixed S. 6 and 8-10 (secondary) *Àlex Amorós*	Serial (epilogue: single block)

Source: Author.

In the first case, there is the strategy of gradually raising awareness by means of many different cases in different seasons or alternatively, which we can describe as a relevant approach. We include those themes where the protagonism falls on a fixed, main character for which regular viewers have extensive biographical knowledge and where the story is developed throughout the serial. Among these, we have highlighted those unique cases that lead to the logical inference of the contemporary social and news context and dissemination among a large part of the battery of characters, assisted suicide being paradigmatic due to the controversy introduced in a prioritised way. But illegal behaviour on the part of children, unemployment, the risk of marginalisation and mental disability in adult life are also relevant social issues.

This allows us to conclude that *El cor de la ciutat* (2000-2009) is firmly committed to narrating stories in which social issues are highlighted, and it has become a privileged forum of Catalan society of the last decade.

Notes

1 The record is held by *Guiding Light* (CBS), which ended shortly beforehand, on 18 September 2009, and exceeded 15,700 episodes over 72 years. In Spain, *Goenkale* (ETB, 1994), a contemporary of *Poblenou*, reached 3,000 episodes in July 2010.

2 Reaching 1,000 episodes in its fifth season, it had an audience share of 42.1%. Although afterwards this fell to 35.1% when the serial was renewed and, since the seventh season, the share has been less than 30%, it is still clearly above the average annual share of TV3, which it doubled up to the sixth season (index of positive contribution to the channel).

3 *La Columna* with Julia Otero (2000-2004) and *El Club* with Albert Om (2004-2009) gave way, in September 2009, to *Divendres* presented by Espartac Peran and Xavi Coral, which accompanied the end of the serial.

4 The most significant analepses can be found in the sixth season (sparking off in the summer period) and the ninth (altering the enunciative point of view to a multiple point of view through detective-based plots).

5 In general terms, it chooses to habitually over-represent the services sector, more suitable in narrative terms because it provides places for the characters to meet.

6 Moreover, as someone reinserted into the community, she initially plays the role of narrator and the serial avoids resorting to enunciative figures that interrupt the apparent neutrality of the story.

7 For the end, Televisió de Catalunya broadcast a summary of the serial throughout the summer in episodes of one hour that followed the core line of development of the main characters. *Històries del cor* is based, precisely, on these three family clusters.

8 We apply the ethnographic content analysis model proposed by Altheide (1996). The initial document sources are VQPT reports on RAI, the proposal of Berrio (1999) and sociological studies applied to the Catalan situation that allow us to obtain indications regarding the degree of controversy of social issues (Giner, 1998; Andrés, 2001). In addition to the few studies applied to Catalan serials, already mentioned, other significant precedents are certain analytical approaches, from Gallego (1999) to Sáez (2008).

9 Although many different incidences can be detected in *El cor de la ciutat*, as a serial with an open structure (disturbances or accidents with visible consequences), and these are often made public on social networks or in texts secondary to *El cor de la ciutat* (in magazines or the internet itself), we cannot include these analytical variables without also studying the broadcaster.

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10 The last Gay Pride Demonstration organised by the State Federation of Lesbians, Homosexuals, Transsexuals and Bisexuals (FELGTB) and the Madrid group COGAM, held in Madrid on 3 July 2010, was in fact under the slogan of "For Trans equality". They demanded diversity be recognised in education and employment, as well as measures of positive discrimination and a health system that facilitates the transsexualising process (including surgical alteration) in all autonomous communities. And they asked the World Health Organisation to remove transsexuality from the international classification of illnesses.

11 The first season includes the verbal tale of former Welsh priest Matt Collins regarding assisted suicide. The second narrates the tough situation experienced by the Peris family when they disconnect their daughter, brain dead after a traffic accident, while the fifth season presents us with Toni Esteve as a terminally ill patient who is planning his suicide. But the most explicit discourses on death reappear in the epilogue to *El cor de la ciutat* in the plot "celebrating life", where the elderly characters take their leave.

12 Squatting as social conflict related to property speculation appears on *El cor de la ciutat* just after the squatters were removed from La Makabra and then Can Ricart at the end of 2006. The old industrial warehouse in Poblenou (Barcelona) was squatted for six years as a home and civic and cultural centre where members of stage schools or renowned circus troops could rehearse, such as Circ Cric, who spoke out against the police action.

13 Euthanasia and assisted suicide are issues that are still being strongly debated in society and, as yet, there have not been any consequent solid political initiatives or changes in Spain's legal framework. By chance, the first TV incursion (Periodistas, Globomedia, 1998) precedes the most relevant news item, that of Ramón Sampedro. *El cor de la ciutat* covers this issue in 2004, at a time when new imaginaries for this are being constructed via fiction (Mar adentro, by Alejandro Amenábar, is contemporary to this). The controversy still rages and is visible today in other formats (e.g. Banda ampla, 28 April 2011).

The reinsertion of serial rapists was also an object of debate in parallel to the serial being broadcast. The leading reference is Martínez Sigul, "the second rapist of the Eixample", who came out of prison in May 2007, in accordance with the old Penal Code: he had not been rehabilitated but had completed 16 years of a 65-year sentence for 14 sexual assaults. He returned to prison in October 2009, awaiting the fourth sentence accumulated since he had left. A legal debate has been started due to social pressure and the dissemination of scientific studies on sexual delinquents that cannot be rehabilitated.

14 On the one hand, some of the social issues belonging to the epigraphs of reinsertion into society, domestic violence (child abuse and child sexual abuse), harassment or the generic issue of delinquency are included and, on the other hand, some of the problems we have grouped under the umbrella of risk of marginalisation (transsexuality and immigration). It should be noted, however, that not all these are in line with the variable minimal relation to the network of social relations described by the serial.

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