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## NEW TELEVISION MELODRAMA ACTORS: AN EXAMPLE, BELEN ESTEBAN

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### ABSTRACT:

The current Spanish television programs have generated a series of characters that resemble the traditional archetypes of movie genres. A case is that of Belén Esteban, a participant in television programs of society or the heart. Due to her vital experience, this young woman symbolizes the archetype of a melodramatic heroin. Analyzing her career, we found out that she completely fits in with the components of the canonical melodrama icons.

**KEY WORDS:** Television- society programs - archetypes melodramatic - new melodramatic heroin.

## NUEVOS PROTAGONISTAS DEL MELODRAMA TELEVISIVO: UN EJEMPLO, BELEN ESTEBAN

### RESUMEN:

La programación televisiva actual española ha generado una serie de personajes que se asemejan a los arquetipos tradicionales de los géneros cinematográficos. Un caso es el de Belén Esteban, participante en los programas televisivos de sociedad o del corazón. Esta joven por su experiencia vital, simboliza el arquetipo de una heroína melodramática. Analizando su trayectoria comprobamos que se adecua por completo a los componentes de los iconos del melodrama canónico.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Televisión - programas de sociedad - arquetipos melodramáticos - nueva heroína melodramática.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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Since the close of the twentieth century, as a symbol of a crisis of social and economic values, the programming of TV channels has generated a new series of programs where the protagonists are anonymous people involved in the audiovisual media and telling their vital adventures. These new television formats known as "talk-shows" have meant the arrival to TV channels of a large group of characters that have disappeared as quickly as they came up.

Together with "*talk shows*", there have been others known as "*reality shows*", where another group of sometimes famous characters agree to live in certain places, with no contact with the outside, and to be continuously recorded for the television channel broadcasting the program. Their specialization has led to the phenomenon of the Big Brother (Gran Hermano in Spanish) program, which has broken the record of editions in Spain, with respect to EU countries.

In addition to these new structures of television programs, there has also been a renewal with respect to those who specialize in the society column, which is popularly called heart column or celebrity gossip.

They have lost this elegant and distant tone which social issues were dealt with by the written press and have become more acidic and stark reports showing us the reality of that social group, openly and with no disguise. That is, we are not presented with a fictional world but we are told about the squabbles and strife of many of the characters belonging to what is called "*world of the heart*" or tabloids. These new formats of the traditional society column, which has usually appeared in any written means of communication, have also been called "*trash TV*" due to the sensationalistic approach of the reports, which has resulted in some members of that social group being unwilling to appear in such spaces.

## **2. OBJECTIVES**

Reflecting on the current Spanish television programming which has generated a series of characters that resemble traditional archetypes of film genres. As Belen Esteban, participating in television programs or heart society this young for his life experience, symbolizes the epitome of a melodramatic heroine. Analyzing his career check that conforms completely to the components of canonical icons melodrama, from this perspective is the analysis which convenes in this article.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

From a critical and observational let us note that the social report has traditionally been part of the sections of the leading newspapers. There were even times in which an intellectual appeared on the pages of general information of the newspaper because he had given a lecture, and some pages later he was also cited as a highlight of a party or social gathering. A very prominent example was the Noble Prize Camilo José Cela.

The truth is that television formats have significantly changed, and this type of new contents has taken many hours in the TV channel programs.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

#### 4.1. New formats

In the recent Spanish television programs there have been three, not broadcasted anymore, which have generated a new model of contents and presentation of the television format.

These three programs have been Tombola (Tómbola in Spanish), Martian Chronicles (Crónicas marcianas in Spanish) and Tomatoes here! (¡Aquí hay tomate! In Spanish) Each represented a renovation in the way of offering and coping with information as well as a new twist with respect to programs at that time.

Being broadcasted by regional channels, Tombola included a group of journalists who, as a group, interviewed the famous ones appearing at the program and they made a social commentary together. The information on the world of the heart was already acid and critical.

Being broadcasted by Tele 5, Martian Chronicles was a *"talk-show"* where participants, some of whom were popular as they belonged to the popular pink world or had competed in the Big Brother *"reality show"*, made society reports and also spoke about their own lives, which was of interest to the audience because of the morbid fascination they sometimes aroused.

Being a product of Tele 5 too, Tomatoes here! was a new turning point in the treatment of rose information because of the irony and bitterness of the reports or the way in which the statements made by interviewees was sometimes dealt with.

Currently there is another space that has become a leader in audience and is directed by the one who co-hosted Tomatoes here!, Jorge Javier Vazquez. I mean the daily program on Tele 5 Save me (Sálvame in Spanish) which, due to its high daily rating in the afternoon, has also another edition Friday night.

This program is a new turning point as regards television formats and has been quite popular among the public. What has its attraction been, since its topics are the same as those in another channel? The treatment of the news on the heart is very similar to that in Tomatoes here!, and its structure consists of several journalists and commentators who talk about the issue, it already started in Tombola.

This time, unlike others, the partners have a personal story that is outstanding and well-known by the general public. Some are even involved in the issues discussed or meet those who are observed, so they can provide relevant data.

At the celebration for the hundredth program, Jorge Javier Vazquez, who was awarded the Ondas 2009 Prize for best host with this program, said that its format *"was a perpetual Christmas supper when the family comes together and everyone washes their dirty linen in public"*.

One of the partners is a young woman from Madrid, María Belen Esteban Menéndez, who is part of that constellation of commentators and partners of society programs, but she has a major, outstanding vital experience that has made her become a

media heroine, who has attracted interest from TV viewers who call her *"the people's princess"* and has even made outstanding women of culture and feminism such as Lucía Etxebarria dedicate columns to her or had a newspaper like El Mundo commission an opinion poll on the sympathy Belen Esteban aroused in the Spanish society.

The case of Belen Esteban is unusual, but it is true that she has become a popular phenomenon that arouses interest and her presence on the screen results in tremendous ratings.

Her popular and even populist ways, or her colloquial expressions, or even her temper, have made her a character that is liked very much by most of the audience.

If we analyze the programs of television channels in recent times, there have been many people like her, who have gradually yielded to the passage of time and, what is worse, who have sometimes self-destructed (remember the case of the transsexual *"The Venom"* (La Veneno in Spanish)); however, Belen Esteban, *"The Esteban"*, has improved her image and achieved a great deal of popularity that has made her rank above the person with whom she had an affair and who was the reason for her starting to become popular, the matador Jesus Janeiro, *"Jesulín from Ubrique"*. The aforementioned poll compared her with neither the current wife of the bullfighter, to the detriment of the latter, who has neither the support nor the sympathy of the mainstream audience.

It is therefore obvious that the character of Belen Esteban has survived over time and been supported by high rates of fame and feelings of support from the Spanish average public. Jorge Javier Vazquez said in a publication, *"it is indisputable that Belen is responsible for part of our success, I think she has been reinforced by the latest events."* What has enabled this phenomenon? That is, these facts are not commonplace since these characters disappear as quickly as they came up, they are engulfed by the programming system that varies and changes according to audience rates.

So this time we have a phenomenon isolated from the rest, which is a milestone as regards what such characters symbolize and that even led Belen to present something as symbolic and traditional as New Year's Chimes at the Sun Gate (Puerta del Sol in Spanish) as she did on New Year's Eve in 2009. Maybe in this case, is an evident fact that Belen Esteban represents an iconic figure of personal self-improvement, since she has overcome a failed affair, a tortuous marriage and her addiction to certain substances. In brief, we could say that she is an attractive character to the public, because she has referential iconic components for the viewer who is receptive and, therefore, the target.

In particular, this kind of character, an abandoned woman, who fights alone to educate her offspring, who overcomes multiple barriers, emotional disappointments, conflicting marriage, addictions, is one of the prototypes to star in a melodrama, in the canonical concept of such genre. That is, we can consider that what Belen Esteban symbolizes to the Spanish average society corresponds to the archetypes of what we might consider to be a new melodrama heroine. A genre the public likes

very much and which has had a long series of main characters, first in movies, then in television series and now, as in this case, characters from programs of the heart or from those of the *"trash TV"*.

Belen Esteban has many of the elements that make up a melodramatic heroine. She is therefore the archetype of a new iconic figure, the melodrama heroine in times of crisis.

#### **4.2. The melodrama**

The melodrama is a genre that started in the theater, with the presence of music, which continues in movies, where it stands as a canonical genre, which has contaminated the television series and other series of audiovisual products.

As a genre, the melodrama is acknowledged within the ideology of society as it presents a series of elements that are common to the entire spectrum of what is melodramatic, which can range from the Latin to the Scandinavian, or from the black to the melodramatic comedy.

In the melodrama, the diegesis directly relates to the receiver of the message (spectator), so there are frequent ruptures of naturalist logic, of what Aristotle conceptualized as credible, credibility, and there can even be illogical situations, since the characters act out of overflowing emotions that lead them to be nearly irrational.

Obviously, this anomalous situation always affects the main character-victim, with whom the viewer is identified from the beginning of the story, versus the antagonist-stalker. Also, many times the receiver of the film corpus has more information on the plot than the main characters themselves, who will find out everything at the end, in an exacerbated anagnorisis.

Such information received by the viewer's makes them deeply moved, and they sometimes personalize the vicissitudes experienced by the main character.

In brief, the melodramatic structure is based on the second reading of the text, since what appears at first includes hidden constraints, many of them being from the *"past"* of the main characters, which interfere with them and limit the conditions of their lives.

Along his melodramatic vicissitudes, the main character undergoes a development, which Aristotle defined as *"hamartia"*, which entails a process of atoning for the error or guilt from years ago, and our hero must overcome it with sacrifice. In brief, the Judeo-Christian sense of guilt, in which the one who has fallen has to get up but he has to grieve for those sins in order to achieve total liberation.

In that process, to achieve full autonomy, the main character undergoes liberation and metamorphosis. In the melodrama, the moralizing burden of which is usual, the main character is intended to triumph at the end, though there are times when he does not.

Thus we speak of a melodrama of triumph and a melodrama of failure. The latter is less common, it stems directly from the Greek tragedy. However, the melodrama of triumph allows the main character to reach or recover what we had lost in the past or at the beginning of dramatic diegesis. That zenith, that culmination of his way, comes through the entangled and logical flow of the dramatic action. Although sometimes a *"tour de force"*, is carried out for the hero to have a fair and happy end. That end can be reached through a *"deus ex machina"* or through the final revelation of a data or action that was unknown even to the viewers-receivers themselves. This information is usually disclosed via the confession made by a character to the main character or his companion.

In brief, melodrama is a unique genre that has established parameters underlying the foundation of this canon, which diversifies according to the continents or cultures, but which starts from a fundamental principle; make the mass be moved by the experiences of a hero who overcomes everything, as a symbol of eternal human endurance.

#### **4.3. The melodramatic heroine**

In the previous section we generically discussed about the hero, mainly because the main character of melodrama is a woman, a heroine who overcomes everything, with superhuman strength.

Let us recall some of the movies starring the two undisputed melodrama actresses Bette Davis – *The Old Maid*, 1939, Edmund Goulding; *Now Voyager*, 1942, Irving Rapper – or Joan Crawford – *Soul in Torment*, *Mildred Pierce*, 1945, Michael Curtiz, or both together, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, 1962, Robert Aldrich.

The woman undoubtedly stands as the main character par excellence of melodrama, since her pain can be externalized more than that of the hero and her endurance will be more valued as she a female.

The case in question stars a woman who has overcome certain situations throughout her life (being in love with a bullfighter, she is rejected by his family and, after bearing the matador a daughter, she has to leave the house where they live and break up with the man and raise her little girl on her own) and has the recognition of the television viewer in general. If we clear the iconic characteristic of melodrama we will see that Belen Esteban meets many of its guidelines.

The melodrama or what is melodramatic has a number of common elements that characterize and define it:

A narrative mechanics where what is called *"implausibility of intrigue"* as well as strange and bizarre adventures and situations come up.

A spectacular nature: given the exaggerated feelings or exceptional situations that arises.

Archetypal characters as they are repeated all over melodramas.

Moralizing intention, since the *"happy ending"* or the binomial *"reward-punishment"* occurs quite frequently.

Musical linking, because music is in the origin of this genre.

Negligible populism, since many of these plots are considered "*vulgar*", "*naive*" or "*sentimental*".

The trajectory of Belen Esteban meets those requirements, since her life, portrayed in gossip magazines or television programs, has been characterized by the "improbability of intrigue" because it was not quite clear why she was expelled from the "*Ambiciones*" domain, the country estate owned by the bullfighter. This situation aroused exaggerated feelings, where the main character was the victim and the bullfighter and his family were the oppressors within the block of archetypal characters pointed out above and repeated throughout all melodramatic compositions.

In her career as a popular character who collaborates in programs she has evolved, with a moralizing intention, as the main character has always sought the "*happy ending*", since she married a first love of her youth that ended through a tragic breakup; nevertheless, she gets over it and currently has another partner, whom she met when he drove the ambulance in which she was taken to the hospital as she had a kidney condition; nonetheless, there has been disagreement that has led them to continuous separations. Besides, her having overcome her addictions places her outside the common standard of the rest of society and makes her become an iconic figure of struggle, survival and improvement.

Finally there is negligible populism, since many of these plots are considered "*vulgar*", "*naive*" or "*sentimental*" by other newspapers and columnists, as noted earlier.

Within the framework of what is melodramatic, there are a number of situations that define melodrama and, if we analyze the trajectory of Belen Esteban, we see that she also meets them.

1. Physical separation, reunion. The young woman and the bullfighter broke up. She had broken up with her first love, to reunite again and marry him. Subsequently, there have been breakups, some of them caused by his unfaithfulness.
2. Secret / disclosure. The experiences of Belen Esteban at the country estate owned by the bullfighter, *Ambiciones*, they are gradually being disclosed by her or by journalists or commentators of these programs. Even the current woman of the bullfighter called a television program where she told how she had been derogatorily treated by the family of her husband, as happened to Esteban.
3. Social inequality. We have to consider that she came from a neighborhood in the outskirts of Madrid, to marry into a family that ranked high socially thanks to the bullfighter.
4. Adultery / prevented love. Many of the alleged affairs the bullfighter had with young women while he lived with Esteban have been disclosed. Their love was prevented by the family of the bullfighter

5. Disease / disablement. Belen Esteban has a health disorder due to some blood sugar rises resulting in her receiving medical care.

6. Torture / suffering. The life story of the young woman has been characterized by suffering as she left her partner and, sometimes at the beginning, she was stigmatized by society.

7. False pretenses. At times the young woman has told the media about sentimental situations or partners that did not match reality

8. Death. The disappearance of the young woman's father, while she was without a partner, shocked her life.

There must also be means and environments that define melodrama such as the family, closed worlds (madhouses, hospitals ...) or the crossing of social classes. This time the bullfighting world is characterized by being a conclusive area.

Among the characters in melodrama we can find the traitor and the victim, the latter almost always being a woman, and next to her is the comic character, which acts as a counterpoint. . Obviously, the star of this media melodrama is a woman, who also declared that one of the people related to the bullfighter from Ubrique was a *"treacherous neighbor"*.

#### **4.4. Esteban the heroine**

After what has been pointed out above, we understand the media attraction Belen Esteban arouses in a mainstream, middle-class audience, who follows in detail her vital vicissitudes, as it might be the attention paid by the ombudsman to the way in which the young woman treated her daughter in the media. The performance of this young woman on TV, either crying or laughing, is related to the melodramatic typology.

Pérez Rubio remarks that:

Excited by emotional stress, the characters often pass easily and spontaneously from laughing self-commiseratingly and pleasingly to crying deadily in a reaction proper to hysterical temperaments, especially in the case of melodramatic heroines, who have repressed the manifestation of their passions.

This kind of performance corresponds to Esteban's behavior sometimes in front of TV cameras, when she has felt she is being attacked or made vulnerable.

The catharsis produced by this participant in TV programs decisively influences the public, who follows every single word she utters in her statements and appearances. She has even been compared, for her title of "people's princess", with figures as important as Eva Peron or Diane of Wales. Furthermore, viewers take sides with her, and in some programs they express their opinion in that regard, as they have this possibility when there is public at program recording or broadcast, which is impossible in other melodramatic performances. But what varies at no time is this *"communion"* or empathy established with the character, with whom you suffer at



the same time, as happens with the melodrama stars: "*The tears she makes many viewers shed result, in turn, from the emotional upset and enjoyment brought about by her sympathy for the pain of her patient characters, even when they have fallen into moral failure*".

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Therefore, we understand that Belen Esteban has become a symbolic figure, a reference in the current television programs, as there is a number of elements in her life that transcend it and symbolize a certain spectrum of Spanish woman but, besides, her ways and modes of performance and communication fit, as we have seen, into the parameters established for the melodramatic figure, making her arouse greater attraction in the public, who are so dear to a canonical genre as melodrama.

We are facing a major television phenomenon which, in addition to transcending the screen, symbolizes a series of benchmarks proper to our own Latin culture; that is why they make Belen Esteban the heroine of melodrama in times of crisis.

Her patterns, as we have described above, conform to those corresponding to a melodramatic heroine.

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