

Critical Book Reviews

ARMBRUSTER, S. *Watching nostalgia: An analysis of nostalgic television fiction and its reception*

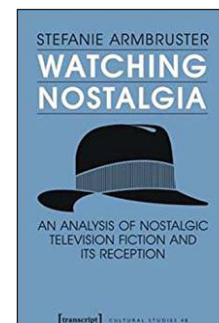
Germany: Transcript Verlag, 2016, 436 p.

ISBN: 978-3-8376-3509-6

BY **CELINA NAVARRO**

GRISS-UAB Researcher

navarrobosch01@gmail.com



Television fiction in recent years has been characterised by the large amount of products that look to the past, whether remakes of old series, reruns, or new productions that set the action in bygone days. Series like *Downton Abbey* (ITV, 2010), *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007), *Hawaii Five-0* (CBS, 2010) or *Borgia* (Sky Italia, 2011) are good examples, with considerable international audience success.

Stefanie Armbruster has published *Watching nostalgia: An analysis of nostalgic television fiction and its reception* with the aim of theorising about television nostalgia, an under-researched subject within academic studies on the audiovisual sector. The book is based on the results of her doctoral thesis, completed at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

The study's main approach, and its most important contribution, is to relate the two trends most widely used by academics when it comes to studying television nostalgia: on the one hand, textual analysis of the works and the identification of elements that may generate this feeling in viewers; on the other hand, the study of the audience's reception of these elements. The analysis focuses on the television contexts of Spain and Germany, two highly interesting markets in the study of nostalgia due to their social history and recent politics.

The book is divided into three parts that reflect each of the main goals set. In the first section, the author focuses on the concept of nostalgia from the theoretical perspective of the discourse of nostalgia, studies on memory, and theories on the aesthetics of emotions. While the term *nostalgia* is difficult to define, the author makes a clear distinction between fiction emotions, which are generated directly by the text, such as empathy with one of the characters, and artefact emotions, which arise from concerns related to the production as an artefact. This distinction serves as an idea that goes throughout the book both for the theoretical part and in the analysis of results, mitigating the complexity of the subject.

The second section addresses nostalgic texts, mainly reruns, remakes and period dramas, and analyses the textual characteristics of two productions per genre. The series

analysed are foreign productions with a high impact in the two countries and therefore well-known by the audience. This section on the textual analysis of the six works is interesting due to the exhaustive description of each genre and case study. The most noteworthy element is the analysis of the social context in each country at the time of the series' first broadcast and of the cultural impact both in Spain and Germany on the basis of political contextualisation and the evaluation of the production by specialised television critics. In this section, the most formal aspects of the work are also highlighted, such as the characters, the music, the set or editing, identifying the elements that could generate nostalgia.

Next, the third and final section of the book relates the nostalgia-generating elements highlighted in the previous section with how they are decoded by the audience through an analysis of focus group results. This section is stimulating since it constantly questions the definition of nostalgia and the theoretical concepts considered previously. Nevertheless, while in the results of the previous section the consideration of the three nostalgic genres generates a clear and detailed discourse on each production, the discussion of the reception of the three genres reduces the depth of the results for each of them. The order of discussion of each series also directly alters the discussion, influencing an effective comparison between genres.

The members of the four focus groups are classified according to two variables: nationality (Spanish or German) and age group (25 to 35 years and 55 to 65 years). This comparison between the audiences of the two countries and age groups allows for a deeper comparison, reaching the conclusion that the most relevant differences are found between age groups rather than countries. This result raises questions about the importance of cultural context in feelings of nostalgia and shows that the stage of life in which the person finds him/herself during the first viewing of a production is more relevant for the subsequent presence or absence of nostalgia. As Armbruster indicates, series enjoyed during childhood or adolescence are more prone

to having elements that activate nostalgia for the viewer. It's therefore easier for reruns to generate nostalgia since there is more time between the first viewing and the present.

Armbruster's study introduces a complex and exhaustive perspective on the subject that allows us to question the theoretical concepts previously considered and to identify which elements are the real generators of nostalgia in the audience. At the same time, the comparison between two of the most important European television markets arouses interest in the influence of social context as a conditioning factor in feelings of nostalgia. In short, the book *Watching Nostalgia: An analysis of nostalgic television fiction and its reception* is a preliminary exploratory study that, as the author emphasises, needs to be complemented with more empirical research that combines the study of nostalgic texts and their reception.