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Spanish TV Fiction in Times of Pandemic

Nuclear and Transversal Stories About COVID-19

Abstract

2020 marked an unprecedented change in the world population, social relationships, and cultural consumption itself. The outbreak of COVID-19 not only distanced people, families, and countries but also had many consequences on how we relate to each other. In this context, television was one of the sources of communication, entertainment, and bonding that resonated the most in times of crisis.

This research aims to provide an in-depth study of the Spanish TV and VOD series born in the context of the pandemic to show how the discourse of COVID-19 has gone through the ways of consumption and entertainment and also through the fictional narratives. A content analysis of the series released since the beginning of the health crisis in March 2020 is carried out in order to establish formal, narrative, and other aspects of pandemic stories. The study intends to demonstrate that COVID-19 has become a discernible theme in Spanish television, both as a narrative core and as a transversal motif in subsequent productions.

Keywords

TV, fiction, Spanish fiction, COVID-19, pandemic

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Introduction

During the hard times of lockdown, hundreds of series, movies, and television programs were allies of the desperation and ignorance of the population. In the midst of this lockdown situation, television became an escape route from the moments of tension experi-

enced. During the more than three months of the state of alarm in Spain, television consumption evolved from 325 minutes of television in the first seven days to 221 minutes per person per day in the last week.¹⁾ The lockdown period witnessed a record consumption with an average of 284 minutes of daily viewing per person per day. The increase was 40% over the month prior to the pandemic.²⁾ During this period, television became the main medium used by the audience for both information and entertainment.³⁾ Moreover, in this context, on-demand television platforms gained a relevant role, helping and encouraging the entertainment of thousands of people who, isolated at home, turned to the small screen as a way of escaping the situation.⁴⁾

At the time of writing, the situation appears to have improved, and sanitary measures and restrictions have been considerably reduced. However, the mark left by the COVID-19 health crisis must be understood as a historical and social milestone with consequences that have made a dent not only in our way of relating and communicating but also in the ways of consuming cultural products and in the social treatment of audiovisual stories. This paper aims to conduct an in-depth study that exposes the thematic treatment of the health crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic in Spanish television fiction. For this purpose, the series premiered after the beginning of the health crisis have been considered and subjected to content analysis to detect trends and stories linked to the phenomenon.

Review of Literature on Television Fiction

Television fiction must be conceived as a portrait of society that, due to the great impact of its discourse, acquires a significant value in the construction of knowledge and understanding of reality. It plays a determining role in the configuration of collective identity since it is a cultural device that presents models of identification that reproduce values, beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes adopted by a broad and heterogeneous audience.⁵⁾ Moreover, it can also be used for guidance as a resource to assimilate situations and models of conduct in certain conditions.

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- 1) “Anuario de audiencias de TV del año 2020,” *Kantar Media*, 2021, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.kantar.com/es/campaigns/anuario-audiencias-tv-2020>.
 - 2) “Análisis mensual del comportamiento de la audiencia TV: Marzo 2020,” *Barlovento Comunicación*, 2020, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.reasonwhy.es/media/library/barlovento-analisis-audiencias-marzo2020.pdf>, 4.
 - 3) Reinald Besalú, “Pandemia y medios de comunicación convencionales,” in *Comunicación política en tiempos de coronavirus*, eds. Antoni Gutiérrez and Carles Pont (Barcelona: Càtedra Ideograma UPF de Comunicación política y democracia, 2020), 106. Mireia Montaña Blasco, Candela Ollé Castellà, and Montse Lavilla Raso, “Impacto de la pandemia de Covid-19 en el consumo de medios en España,” *Revista latina de comunicación social*, no. 78 (2020), 155–167.
 - 4) Patricia Palomares-Sánchez, Tatiana Hidalgo-Marí, and Jesús Segarra-Saavedra, *Las series españolas en 2021: I Informe Anual de Teletropías: Observatorio del discurso televisivo* (Alicante: Colección Mundo Digital, 2022), accessed December 20, 2022, <https://rua.ua.es/dspace/handle/10045/121607>.
 - 5) Anna Tous-Rovirosa, “Paleotelevisión, neotelevisión y metatelevisión en las series dramáticas estadounidenses,” *Comunicar: Revista Científica de Comunicación y Educación* 17, no. 33 (2009), 175–183. Elena Galán-Fajardo, “Construcción de género y ficción televisiva en España,” *Comunicar: Revista científica de comunicación y educación* 14, no. 28 (2007), 229–236.

In this sense, fiction incorporates a set of symbols and values with which the recipients are linked in the configuration of their own identity, coming to see them as symbolic spaces of great richness through which they can construct numerous meanings to be used in their personal experience.⁶⁾ However, identity is not something unique and immutable, but is in continuous evolution and makes use of the potential of television discourses as an ideal resource for constructing, deconstructing, and modifying itself.⁷⁾ Thus, we observe that television fiction encompasses discourses of reality and reproduces lifestyles, values, and behavioral patterns that show a portrait of society and present symbolic resources with which to identify and value individual and collective experiences. According to Buckingham,⁸⁾ the media in general, and television in particular, help to shape our vision of reality and provide us with the necessary tools to interpret it.

Although television fiction is identified with evasion and entertainment, its possibilities go beyond this, to the point of being a documentary and constructive resource for the society that sustains it.⁹⁾ The fact is that the concept of agenda setting, which has been so frequently talked about in the news, also has a presence, albeit tangential, in fiction products.¹⁰⁾ This phenomenon leads us to understand television fiction as a portrait of society and that this portrait transfers to the television story beliefs, dogmas and opinion speeches, as well as attitudes and positions before certain situations or topics.¹¹⁾

Background to the Study of Television and COVID-19

In the context of the global pandemic, many scientific studies have addressed its consequences in the media from different perspectives. Most works have focused on the study of news from general perspectives¹²⁾ or the role of public television.¹³⁾ However, while

6) Julián Pindado, "Los medios de comunicación y la construcción de la identidad adolescente," *Revista Zer Comunicación*, no. 21 (2006), 19.

7) Chris Barker, *Televisión, globalización e identidades culturales* (Barcelona: Paidós, 2003), 20.

8) David Buckingham, "La educación en medios de comunicación y el fin del consumidor crítico," *Monografías virtuales: Ciudadanía, democracia y valores en sociedades plurales*, no. 1 (2003), n.p.

9) Charo Lacalle, *Jóvenes y ficción televisiva: Construcción de identidad y transmedialidad* (Cataluña: UOC-Press, 2013). Manuel Palacio, *Historia de la televisión en España* (España: Editorial Gedisa, 2020).

10) Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972), 176–187. Maxwell McCombs, "A look at Agenda-setting: past, present and future," *Journalism Studies* 6, no. 4 (2005), 543–557. Kaye Sweetser, Guy Golan, and Wayne Wanta, "Intermedia Agenda Setting in Television, Advertising, and Blogs During the 2004 Election," *Mass Communication and Society* 11, no. 2 (2008), 197–216.

11) Galán-Fajardo, "Construcción de género y ficción televisiva en España."

12) Eduardo Villena-Alarcón and Lidia Caballero-Galeote, "COVID-19 Media Coverage on Spanish Public TV," *Trípodos* 2, no. 47 (2020), 103–126. Antonio Sanjuán Pérez, Sandra Martínez-Costa, José-Juan Videla-Rodríguez, and Teresa Nozal-Cantarero, "Información sobre coronavirus y Covid-19 en las principales cadenas españolas de TV en el periodo previo al confinamiento," *Profesional de la Información* 29, no. 6 (2020), accessed December 20, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2020.nov.11>.

13) Miguel Túñez-López, Martín Vaz-Álvarez, and César Feiras-Ceide, "Covid-19 y medios de servicio público: impacto de la pandemia en la televisión pública en Europa," *Profesional de la Información* 29, no. 5 (2020), accessed December 20, 2022, <https://revista.profesionaldelainformacion.com/index.php/EPI/article/view/81201>.

there have been numerous studies on television in the two years following the pandemic both at the academic level¹⁴⁾ and through reports and opinions,¹⁵⁾ studies on television fiction have not been so frequent, at least thus far.

The few previous articles on the role of fiction in the context of pandemics analyze works from the Italian context,¹⁶⁾ the German context,¹⁷⁾ or from countries such as Belgium, France, and Switzerland.¹⁸⁾ Also noteworthy is an approach by Formoso Barro¹⁹⁾ centered on the European scenario and the transformations undergone. In the Spanish context, a work by Mateos-Pérez²⁰⁾ stands out, confirming that Spanish research of the pandemic focused primarily on the news genre, even though, considering the short time window, it has occasionally dealt with issues related to entertainment programming as well. The author himself describes a characteristic function of pandemic productions by indicating that:

[Fiction,] on the one hand, contributes to the construction of the collective imaginary, following the concept proposed by Morin (1965). Fiction series, conveyed through television, identified as consumer products and containers of media personalities, feed society with symbolic material through stories, images, ideas, or myths [...]. That is to say, from the fictional television story, a common memory is built, and consistency is given to the shared memories of society as a whole.²¹⁾

In the Spanish scenario, other studies have focused on the production and reception context of television works created during the pandemic²²⁾ or on newly emerged narrative

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- 14) Mireia Montaña Blasco, Candela Ollé Castellà, and Montse Lavilla Raso, "Impacto de la pandemia de Covid-19 en el consumo de medios en España," *Revista latina de comunicación social*, no. 78 (2020), 155–167. Túñez-López, Vaz-Álvarez, and Fieiras-Ceide, "Covid-19 y medios de servicio público."
- 15) "2021 Análisis de la industria televisiva audiovisual," *Barlovento Comunicación*, 2022, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://barloventocomunicacion.es/audiencias-anuales/2021-analisis-de-la-industria-televisiva-audiovisual/>. Palomares-Sánchez, Hidalgo-Marí, and Segarra-Saavedra, *Las series españolas en 2021. "Anuario de audiencias de TV del año 2020," Kantar Media*, 2021, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.kantar.com/es/campaigns/anuario-audiencias-tv-2020>.
- 16) Valentina Boursier, Alessandro Musetti, Francesca Gioia, Maèva Flayelle, Joël Billieux, and Adriano Schimmenti, "Is Watching TV Series an Adaptive Coping Strategy During the COVID-19 Pandemic? Insights From an Italian Community Sample," *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, April 21, 2021, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2021.599859/full>.
- 17) Lothar Mikos, "Film and Television Production and Consumption in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic — The Case of Germany," *Baltic Screen Media Review*, no. 8 (2020), 30–34.
- 18) Vera Sigre-Leirós, Joël Billieux, Christine Mohr, Pierre Maurage, Daniel King, Adriano Schimmenti, and Maèva Flayelle, "Binge-watching in times of COVID-19: A longitudinal examination of changes in affect and TV series consumption patterns during lockdown," *Psychology of Popular Media* 12, no. 2 (2022), 173–185.
- 19) María Josefá Formoso Barro, "Transformación de los sistemas de producción audiovisual tras la pandemia: Estudio del caso de España en el contexto europeo," *Palabra Clave* 25, no. 3 (2022), accessed December 20, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.5294/pacla.2022.25.3.7>.
- 20) Javier Mateos-Pérez, "Narrativas televisivas en contexto de crisis: El COVID-19 en las series de ficción televisiva española," *IC Revista Científica de Información y Comunicación*, no. 18 (2021), 131–153.
- 21) *Ibid.*, 152.
- 22) Mar Chicharro-Merayo, Fátima Gil-Gascón, and Sergio García, "Narrativas de ficción para relatar una pandemia: Análisis y recepción de Diarios de la cuarentena (Televisión Española, 2020)," *Estudios sobre el mensaje*

and discursive strategies in the British context.²³⁾ Furthermore, research is beginning to develop on viruses, pandemics, and global epidemics (real or dystopian) in fiction prior to the COVID-19 crisis.²⁴⁾

In this context, our paper aims to provide a significant advance in the studies on television fiction framed by the pandemic, with the goal of bringing together the different perspectives addressed so far and documenting the treatment of the health crisis by Spanish fiction in a diegetic way.

Objectives and Methodology

The work presented here aims to find out how the COVID-19 health crisis has been represented in Spanish-produced TV series. To this end, the following specific objectives are proposed:

- (SO1) Documenting the pandemic discourse through its appearance in Spanish television series. The present objective responds to the research question: How has the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic been covered in Spanish television fiction?
- (SO2) Analyzing the narrative role of the coronavirus pandemic in Spanish fictional series. This objective responds to the research question: How has the Spanish TV fiction incorporated the pandemic for narrative purposes?
- (SO3) Detecting genre and formal trends in the treatment of the coronavirus pandemic in Spanish fiction. This objective responds to the research question: What are the characteristics of Spanish television fiction that have dealt with the pandemic?

To address these questions, we have taken into account the totality of Spanish fiction series production broadcast both on generalist channels of national and regional scope and on video-on-demand platforms operating in Spain. We have considered a sample of all series and miniseries that premiered from March 2020 (when the state of health emergency was declared) until the end of 2022. Our methodology combines content analysis with narrative ethnography, an approach that highlights how the production of narratives always depends on a specific sociocultural context.²⁵⁾ To design this methodology, we considered the principles of discourse analysis developed by Walter Lippman.²⁶⁾ Firstly, a literature review was carried out to know the state of the art in studies on television and health crisis, with a special interest in studies on fiction. Once we have identified the series

periodístico, no. 28 (2022), 293–304. Rut Martínez-Borda, Alba García Vega, and Pilar Lacasa Díaz, “Series de TV y escenarios digitales en tiempos de pandemia: La casa de papel,” in *Comunicación en la era postcovid, medios audiovisuales y análisis*, eds. Jesús Díaz-Campo and Luz Martínez-Martínez (Madrid: Dykinson, 2021), 246–255.

23) Rodrigo Urcid Puga, “La pandemia como recurso narrativo: Análisis de contenido y discurso de dos audiovisuales,” *Revista panamericana de comunicación* 4, no. 1 (2022), 45–55.

24) Laura Hernández-García and María del Mar Pérez-Segura, “Epidemias, pandemias y virus, desde la ficción a la realidad,” *Revista Española de Comunicación en Salud* 12, no. 2 (2021), accessed December 20, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.20318/recs.2021.6128>.

25) Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, “Narrative Ethnography,” in *Handbook of Emergent Methods*, eds. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy (New York: Guilford Publications, 2008), 241–264.

26) Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2004).

and miniseries that have dealt with the pandemic in some of their episodes or in the entire narrative, we have classified the samples from two perspectives. The first one groups together those series developed in the context of the health crisis and whose narrative is entirely centered on the pandemic discourse (coding level 1). The second perspective includes those fictions that have integrated the pandemic narrative in a contextual way, updating their diegesis and alluding to the situation with a merely updating or testimonial purpose (coding level 2). This second perspective has made it possible to detect a third form of appearance of the pandemic story, derived from those fictions that have already emerged during the pandemic and, in search of the topical discourse, considered it as another element of the narrative (coding level 3). This third level includes those series conceived in a context marked by the health crisis, and their need for narrative topicality has conditioned the presence of the pandemic in the story. The final analysis sample comprises the series and miniseries that have, directly or indirectly, dealt with the health crisis in their diegesis (see Table 1).

Table 1: Sample Analysis

Premiere	Title	Channel	Genre	Treatment	Coding level
06/04/2020	<i>Jo Tambe em Quedo a Casa</i>	TV3	Dramedy	Pandemic story	Level 1
07/04/2020	<i>Diarios de la Cuarentena</i>	TVE	Comedy	Pandemic story	Level 1
03/06/2020	<i>En Casa</i>	HBO	Dramedy	Pandemic story	Level 1
03/07/2020	<i>Relatos Con-fina-dos</i>	Amazon Prime Video	Dramedy	Pandemic story	Level 1
26/03/2021	<i>Besos al Aire</i>	Disney+	Romantic comedy	Pandemic story	Level 1
14/01/2021	<i>Cuéntame Cómo Pasó</i>	TVE	Dramedy	Pandemic update	Level 2
21/10/2021	<i>HIT</i>	TVE	Teen drama	Pandemic update	Level 2
23/09/2021	<i>Madres</i>	Amazon Prime Video	Drama	Pandemic update	Level 2
26/04/2021	<i>Señoras del (h) AMPA</i>	Amazon Prime Video	Comedy	Pandemic update	Level 2
16/01/2022	<i>Express</i>	Starzplay	Thriller	Pandemic update	Level 3
26/10/2021	<i>Todo lo Otro</i>	HBO Max	Dramedy	Post-pandemic	Level 3
22/04/2022	<i>Días Mejores</i>	Amazon Prime Video	Drama	Post-pandemic	Level 3

Source: own elaboration

Spanish Fiction in the Context of the Pandemic: An In-depth Study

Before the coronavirus hit the world's population, fiction told stories of viruses, epidemics, and other dystopias capable of wiping out humanity, even the planet. All of these dystopias came to the fore with the advent of COVID-19 and shook the world's social, political, and economic structures.

However, while the recreation of apocalyptic worlds has been a constant trend in the global audiovisual and cultural offer practically since its origins (cinema, TV series, literature, etc.), the discourses that have introduced these narratives after March 2020 must assume a specific paradigm shift: fiction, as experience in recent years has shown, can be based on reality. Some products — such as the American series *Station Eleven* (HBO Max, 2021), which recreates a desolate society after the swine flu just one year after the pandemic began in the world — respond to this pattern in which reality has surpassed fiction and apocalyptic worlds have recent historical documentation to look back on. Other cases were almost providential; for example, the Spanish fiction *The Barrier* (Atresplayer, 2020), which premiered months before the pandemic, narrated the story of a virus that kept the Spanish health system collapsed, a situation that seemed dystopian in January 2020 and that weeks later became a global reality.

Since the pandemic began and the state of alarm was decreed on March 15, 2020, until the end of 2022, 68 fiction series have been released in Spain, including series, miniseries, and soap operas, regardless of the genre to which they belong. As evidenced by the First Annual Report of the Television Discourse Observatory,²⁷⁾ the production of series and miniseries was maintained in Spain during 2021 despite the pandemic. In other words, even though in the months of extreme lockdown, there may have been a slowdown in premieres, the truth is that we cannot speak of a decrease in production or in the number of premieres, something that is led by the productions of video on demand platforms.²⁸⁾

In the specific case of fictional works that have addressed the pandemic discourse, we find that the most numerous are those corresponding to coding level 1 (5 cases), followed by those identified with coding level 2 (4 cases) and, finally, those identified with coding level 3 (3 cases). Next, we proceed to analyze the narrative discourse of each coding block and the fictions that support it.

Level 1: Representation of the Pandemic

After analyzing the totality of television fiction that has dealt with the pandemic narrative, we find that only five fiction products have been produced whose stories focus on the representation of the health crisis. Despite this scarcity, we can say that in general terms, they are products subscribing to the health/pandemic genre, something that gives them a certain hegemonic character compared to the rest of the fiction produced.

27) Palomares-Sánchez, Hidalgo-Marí, and Segarra-Saavedra, *Las series españolas en 2021*.

28) *Ibid.*

The first fiction that focused on lockdown premiered on April 1, 2020, less than a month after the declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic in Spain. It is the Catalan series *Jo També em Quedo a Casa* (I Stay Home Too; TV3, 2020), a dramedy of twenty 15-minute episodes broadcast in a daily format that emphasizes the importance of social networks as forms of communication during the lockdown. The plot revolves around the main characters, who, like a large part of society at the time of broadcast, are not allowed to go out on the streets. For this reason, they have to deal with different personal situations, such as family conflicts and love relationships or friendships from a distance through digital communication.

Jo També em Quedo a Casa is a product created ad hoc during the pandemic that used the resources available at the time to reflect, through an innovative form of a video call, a highly topical issue while complying with the strict security measures required by the Spanish government. Finally, the series ended its broadcast after a month on the air, during which the difficulties in filming and editing the episodes were increased by the tightening of the lockdown measures in Spain.

A week later, on April 7, 2020, the series *Diarios de la Cuarentena* (Lockdown Diaries; TVE, 2020) arrived on our screens on Spanish public television. The television fiction recreates in a humorous tone the life of several people in their homes and the domestic problems that take place during the lockdown. Over the course of eight 30-minute episodes, *Diarios de la Cuarentena* uses short comedy scenes, i.e., sketches, to intersperse the different stories that take place in a total of 10 houses. The series offers a realistic and intimate representation of the issues encountered during this period, such as teleworking and its limitations, living together in small spaces, or the loneliness of the population (particularly the elderly). Moreover, like the series *Jo També em Quedo a casa*, it reflects the importance of using technology to remain connected to society and cope with the situation in the best possible way. As for the filming, since the actors also had to adapt to the exceptional situation in which the country found itself, they were provided with a basic filming kit to carry out the filming from their own homes.

A different case is presented by *En Casa* (At Home; HBO, 2020), an anthology miniseries of five 30-minute episodes that portray lockdown from different perspectives. Through the viewpoint of five Spanish film and television directors (Elena Martín, Rodrigo Sorogoyen, Paula Ortiz, Leticia Dolera, and Carlos Maques-Marcet), each episode tells an independent story that mixes comedy, drama, or even fantasy. With the quarantine caused by the coronavirus as the main thread, the stories develop in a self-conclusive manner and deal with the unusual questions of coexistence raised by the creators. As for the filming, the miniseries was shot on a mobile phone without leaving the house, as if it were an amateur production. In this sense, the quality of the productions varies depending on how the directors decide how to play with the existing limitations in order to present their genuine vision of COVID-19.

In a format remarkably similar to *En Casa*, the summer of 2020 saw the premiere of the miniseries *Relatos Con-fin-a-dos* (Lockdown Stories; Amazon Prime Video, 2020). The fiction is an anthology made up of 5 self-conclusive 15–20-minute episodes written and directed by different screenwriters and directors (Fernando Colomo, David Marqués, Miguel Bardem, Álvaro Fernández Armero, and Juan Diego Botto). With the lockdown as

a backdrop, *Relatos Con-fin-a-dos* covers various genres ranging from romantic comedy to horror, drama, or thriller to approach the lived reality and the process of adapting to the new situation. On this occasion, the fiction was also filmed entirely in lockdown by the actors and actresses who starred in it.

Finally, the romantic comedy *Besos al Aire* (Blowing Kisses; Disney+, 2021) was the fiction with the latest premiere (in early 2021) that focused on the coronavirus. Set during the first wave of the coronavirus, the miniseries of only two 80-minute episodes tells the story of eight strangers who cross paths during the pandemic. With an optimistic and humorous tone, the series connects the main story, set in a hospital where a nurse's aide falls in love with a doctor, with other stories. These subplots deal with everything from the co-existence of a rebellious teenager with her grandparents to the "loving" relationship between a supermarket cashier and her neighbor. Although the fiction gives significant weight to COVID-19 and focuses on its most critical stage, *Besos al Aire* tells these dramatic stories from an emotional, respectful, and positive point of view.

Level 2: The Updating of the Story into a Pandemic Context

Although it is true that the creation of stories primarily focused on the pandemic has been scarce in the Spanish production context, we must highlight how other fictions, which already existed with the arrival of the health crisis, have made narrative efforts to update their plots. They have done so by including secondary, specific, or transversal stories that have dealt with the pandemic in the fictional diegesis.

This is the case of *Cuéntame Cómo Pasó* (Remember When...; TVE, 2001), the long-running Spanish public television series that included a plot about the coronavirus in its 21st season, premiered in early 2021. The series is characterized by a journey through the most relevant socio-political events of recent Spanish history through the experiences of the Alcántara family. Even though the new season was planned to be set in 1992, with the arrival of the coronavirus in Spain, the scriptwriters decided, for the first time in the history of the series, to develop a new parallel timeline in the present that would reflect the events marked by the pandemic.

In this way, *Cuéntame Cómo Pasó* breaks the format of the story and makes a temporal leap to the closest and most unusual reality. Through the main characters, different perspectives of the pandemic are shown. On the one hand, María's character works in a hospital with her husband Jorge, also a doctor, and shows the intensity and harshness of the situation faced by the health workers, who were on the front line facing the disease. The fiction highlights the work of the doctors, exposes the lack of resources and personnel they had, and reflects on some of the gestures carried out by the Spanish population, such as the applause at 8:00 pm, through which many people from their homes thanked and paid tribute to this work. On the other hand, we see other realities such as that of Toni, who is worried about the possibility of infection and is extremely cautious about the measures established to avoid it; and Inés, who is abroad and cannot return to Spain with her family because of the restrictions. The most shocking plot line, however, involves the father of the family, Antonio Alcántara. The series shows how Antonio becomes infected

with COVID-19 and is admitted to the hospital with the disease. Despite being in a serious state of health, Antonio manages to get better and overcome the disease, but only for a short time — he eventually dies from the after-effects of COVID-19. Thus, fiction represents different viewpoints of the same event, reflecting the different realities experienced by society.

While *Cuéntame Cómo Pasó* integrates the health crisis as a significant theme, other Spanish TV fictions have opted for a more superficial adaptation to the coronavirus context. Thus, in the second season of the teen series *HIT* (TVE, 2020–), which premiered at the end of 2021, the pandemic has been over for two years, something that had evidently not happened in reality. The fiction contextualizes the story in a world in which the pandemic has been overcome, but not its economic and psychological consequences. Both the young protagonists and their families suffer a situation of economic instability and uncertainty due to job layoffs and the crisis caused by the closure of companies because of the coronavirus. However, although the story is set in a post-pandemic context, it is mentioned without going into it in any depth.

Similarly, the third season of *Madres* (Mothers; Amazon Prime Video, 2020–) premiered in September 2021 and incorporated some pointed references to the coronavirus through flashbacks. In this sense, it is curious how, once again, Spanish fiction portrays the pandemic as a past event in the lives of the characters, but it is broadcast when the coronavirus still marks the viewers' present. As its creators state, the reason why these scenes refer to the past and not to the present or future is because they were written in the summer of 2020, when the pandemic was believed to last only a few months. Another fiction that fleetingly incorporates dialogue about the coronavirus is the second season of *Señoras del (h)AMPA* (Ladies of the PTA; Amazon Prime Video, 2019–2021). The series was filmed before and after the lockdown and, despite mentioning the pandemic, does not emphasize it in its plot.

Level 3: Post-pandemic Series as Certifiers of the Pandemic

We have also detected the production of fictions that, despite not being originally developed with a concern for the pandemic, have been created and premiered during the health crisis and have introduced references to it into their narratives to a greater or lesser extent. These are, therefore, the series that we have classified as post-pandemic, not because we consider that they were born when the pandemic had ended, but because they were conceived in a context marked by the health crisis and their need for a topical narrative has conditioned the presence of the pandemic in the story.

Thus, *Express* (Starzplay, 2022–), the first Spanish production for the US platform Starzplay, is set in Madrid after the coronavirus pandemic. While it is true that COVID-19 is not given significant weight in the story, it serves as a plot support to justify the increase in fear and the increasingly noticeable difference between the various social classes in Spanish society.

On the other hand, the first Spanish production for HBO Max, *Todo lo Otro* (Everything else; HBO Max, 2021), includes a dialogue referring to the coronavirus in its nar-

rative. In this case, the fiction develops its episodes in a context prior to the pandemic, in which it is not mentioned since it has not occurred yet. However, in the last episode, the voice-over narrating the series tells us that the main characters will have to be confined together because of the pandemic.

Similarly, *Días Mejores* (Better Days; Amazon Prime Video, 2022–) is a series that deals with mental health, loss, and the grieving process of a group of people attending therapy in a pre-pandemic timeframe. Although the fiction takes place outside the existence of the coronavirus, it includes a reference to this story in its final minutes. The series shows how some of the characters see the President of the Spanish Government on television announcing the holding of an extraordinary Council of Ministers to decree a state of alarm in Spain for 15 days to deal with the COVID-19 crisis. Finally, the plot jumps forward in time to show the group in therapy once again and mentions the harsh and terrible situation they all experienced due to the coronavirus.

Discussion

Cabello stated in a study on Chilean television fiction that: “Television fiction is increasingly coming closer to representing political events of the present and reactivating a memory of recent history.”²⁹⁾ In our study, we have been able to confirm that the weight of documentation of recent history in terms of the pandemic is scarce, at least in the Spanish contribution to fiction. However, a little more time may be needed to generate new fictional products that serve as a testimony to what was experienced in the times of COVID-19.

Despite the three dimensions of inclusion of the pandemic story in fiction that we have detected, we confirm that, as Mateos-Pérez stated in a previous study, the pandemic in Spanish television fiction appears “as a frivolous, innocuous, and uncommitted patina.”³⁰⁾ Thus, its inclusion in the stories is more akin to a need for artistic expression, a catharsis, as the aforementioned author argues, than an intention to document recent history through television fiction.

Unlike American series that opted for integrating the pandemic story in fiction, especially in those dealing with health issues, Spanish fiction has barely involved the story of the health crisis in its narratives beyond the cases analyzed above. While American fiction has been committed to the hyperrealism of contemporary medical drama for years³¹⁾ and has continued with that narrative strategy in the months in which the pandemic has hit the world hard, we can affirm that Spanish fiction has acquired a much more conservative role, characterized by the search for the contextual actuality of the diegesis, but distancing itself from the documentary and historical power that fiction contributes to the audiovisual discourse per se.³²⁾

29) Cristian Cabello, “Cuando la ficción anticipa la realidad: Ficción televisiva en Chile (2012–2018),” *Series-International Journal of TV Serial Narratives* 7, no. 2 (2021), 69.

30) Mateos-Pérez, “Narrativas televisivas en contexto de crisis,” 152.

31) Charo Lacalle, “Los médicos en la ficción televisiva,” *Quaderns del CAC*, no. 30 (2008), 55–65.

32) Cabello, “Cuando la ficción anticipa la realidad.”

In this sense, we could highlight the American series *The Good Doctor* as one of the pioneering series in representing the health crisis as such, with its uncertainty and scarcity of medical resources. In the Spanish TV context, this theme has been largely absent, thereby denying us any reflection of the health crisis as it has been suffered by the healthcare workers, staff, population, victims, families, and others.

Nevertheless, including anecdotal allusions can be an intermediate solution to bring a smile to the audience's face through a reality we have all lived through, without hammering on a subject we often want to escape from. After all, this is what Eco defended when he said that comedy is presented as subversive because it allows those who have assumed the rules as inviolable to violate them.³³⁾

Conclusion

The taxonomy of series that have involved the pandemic discourse in one way or another allows us to affirm that the treatment of the pandemic story has not been the same in all the productions recorded. We have been able to confirm that there are three essential ways of introducing the pandemic in Spanish television fiction, at least up to now. These three ways of narrating recent history, as we have seen, comprise:

- 1) Series whose narrative axis is the pandemic itself;
- 2) Series that adapted their stories to the existence of the pandemic and included occasional references to it;
- 3) Series that were conceived when the pandemic was already a reality and, due to the need for topicality in their stories, harmoniously and naturally introduced references to the pandemic into the stories.

The series created amid the pandemic, in which lockdown was the narrative vehicle of the fiction, have, on the one hand, provided the possibility of de-dramatizing the situation, something that was well received by audiences, taking into account the unprecedented consumption of television products. However, as has been observed, most Spanish series continue to recreate "old" normality and have neither dealt with the situation nor included it in their stories.

Spanish fiction has been characterized by the fact that, in general terms, it has avoided the coronavirus, as shown by the few fictions premiered in the period with such treatment. The inclusion of COVID-19-related plots into series whose main story was not directly related to the crisis is circumstantial, but it is evidence of an interest in reflecting reality and the current context in the stories.

In any case, after analyzing the stories that make up this work, we can affirm that, although we must closely follow the upcoming Spanish fiction premieres, everything seems to point to the fact that the coronavirus crisis will pass as a marginal story — at least for now — in the series produced in Spain. After all, imagining a fiction with social distancing and masks could be discouraging for a viewer looking for entertainment.

33) Umberto Eco, *Lo cómico y la regla: La estrategia de la ilusión* (Buenos Aires: Lumen, 1987).

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TV Series

Besos al Aire (Disney+, 2021)
Cuéntame Cómo Pasó (TVE, 2021)
Diarios de la Cuarentena (TVE, 2020)
Días Mejores (Amazon Prime Video, 2022)
En Casa (HBO, 2020)
Express (Starzplay, 2022)
HIT (TVE, 2021)
Jo também em quedo a casa (TV3, 2020)
Madres (Amazon Prime Video, 2021)
Relatos Con-fi-na-dos (Amazon Prime Video, 2020)
Señoras del (h)AMPA (Amazon Prime Video, 2021)
Todo lo Otro (HBO Max, 2021)

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