Mainstream TV and social representations: Netflix and the Rosa Peral case[1]

Arturo Lando
Universidad Suor Orsola
Benincasa de Nápoles
arturo.lando@unisob.na.it

Abstract

This work aims to show how two Netflix audio-visual contents, *Burning Body* and *Rosa Peral's Tapes*, are perfect examples of the functioning of contemporary *mainstream* narratives. The term *mainstream* refers to the set of media content constructed to *maximize the audience*. These two productions narrate the story of Barcelona "Urban Guard Crime" (2017-2020), respectively, using the language of a *fictional* TV series and a *true-crime* documentary. Based on the criterion of *audience maximization*, both products show that the social representations staged by contemporary entertainment narratives need to be based on transgressive, unpleasant, and disturbing elements, even if they seemingly intend to present themselves as *moral tales*. In other words, *mainstreaming* needs relevant *non-mainstream* elements to thrive.

Keywords: content analysis; mainstream; social representations; TV series; non-mainstream.

Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es mostrar cómo dos contenidos audiovisuales emitidos por Netflix, *En el cuerpo en llamas* y *El caso Rosa Peral*, son ejemplos perfectos del funcionamiento de las narrativas mainstream contemporáneas. El término *mainstream (televisión comercial)* se refiere a todos los contenidos mediáticos construidos para *maximizar la audiencia*. Las dos producciones analizadas cuentan la historia del 'Crimen de la Guardia Urbana' de Barcelona (2017-2020) utilizando el lenguaje de la serie de televisión *de ficción* y el del documental *de suspense*, respectivamente. Ambos basados en el criterio

de maximización de audiencia, los dos productos muestran que las representaciones sociales escenificadas por las narrativas de entretenimiento contemporáneas deben basarse en elementos transgresores, desagradables y perturbadores, aunque, ostensiblemente, pretendan presentarse como *narrativas morales*. En otras palabras, el mainstreaming necesita elementos *no mainstream* para prosperar.

Palabras clave: análisis de contenido; televisión comercial; representaciones sociales; series de televisión; televisión convencional; mainstream.

Introduction: a double video product

In September 2023, Netflix, the most widespread multinational platform for video on demand content, published the TV miniseries *Burning Body* (*El cuerpo en llamas*) and the documentary *Rosa Peral's Tapes* (*Las cintas de Rosa Peral*) in Spain. Both audio-visual Spanish products narrate an international audience a crime story that had already captured the attention of the Spanish media a few years ago. More or less consciously, the two products have told the story from *two* different perspectives, and have ended up reopening a debate within the public opinion. Chosen by Netflix to this *double* narrative, the crime story with a strong media connotation began in May 2017 with the discovery of a charred body in the car trunk set on fire near the Foix swamp, not far from Barcelona: within a few weeks the investigation identified the case as a murder committed by a woman and a man against a third man. All of them belonged to the local police. At the time of the murder, the victim was the woman's partner whereas her accomplice had always been her secret lover. The story is still known today under the name reporters titled it: "The Crime of The Guardia Urbana".

> The investigation uncovered (...) lies, cover-ups, parallel relationships, episodes of police violence, revenge porn, manipulations and botched attempts to cover it all. (...) There is no doubt what happened around the love triangle formed by Pedro, Rosa and Albert could not have been imagined by the screenwriter with the wildest imagination. (Muñoz, 2019, p. 3)

The publication of the TV miniseries on the Rosa Peral's case (the most watched in Spain in September 2023), together with the documentary explicitly associated with the series, is of great interest as it offers a privileged opportunity to show in action some strategies paradigms of the mainstream TV narrative of the 21st century. This era is defined by Amanda D. Lotz (2017) as the "post-network" era and based on video on demand content, a role pioneered and championed by Netflix in the box office. The Netflix' double video product is extremely interesting to be analysed since, as Carlos Prieto (2023) states, Rosa Peral appears in the series as a "libertine and murderous policewoman" while in the associated documentary she is presented as a "victim of sexism" which permeates the police, the judges and public opinion. In short, multiple intertwined themes have contributed to the success, first Spanish and then international, of a product that is born and spread strictly adhering to a logic of *audience maximization*.

Methodology: a theoretical approach to two types of media signals

The audience maximization need is here identified as the hallmark for *mainstream* audio-visual narratives production. *Mainstream* is a term borrowed from George Gerbner (1980, pp. 10-29) to indicate a set of signals and social representations conveyed by the audio-visual flow of the TV screen and able to elicit a dominant way of thinking and feeling opposite to another set of needs, feelings, social roles and existential paths which remains in the shadows of the collective consciousness (Jung, 1983). This is the less explored area in the collective sensitivity, corresponding to a *second typology* of signals and eliciting which cultural products can convey (Morin, 1963, p. 187; Colombo, 2003, p. 74). Whereas the first type of signals reinforces the perpetuation of roles and social representations (Livolsi, 2000, pp. 126-133) aimed at protecting the individual and the community from *unpleasantness* and stigma (Goffman, 2003), the second type of media signals and eliciting bucks the ancestral tendency towards representation in order to solicit the audience the contact with the other-than-self and the rising *feelings*. This second type of eliciting, here called *non-mainstream* for convenience, carries out a cultural action opposed to conventional world, individual and social representations, pursuing the exploration of the *unpleasantness* and the risk of stigma.

Nevertheless, in the content analysis here proposed, the two different types of media elicitings are not taken into account as hallmarks of two corresponding cultural products categories. In fact, *mainstream* and *non-mainstream* are not genres but rather "polarities" present in every media phenomenon and in every narrative. Representation in reassuring forms and the exploration of the shadow line are two sides of a coin. They need each other. The two types of signals are closely blended in every narrative giving its consumer a glimpse into new ways of thinking and feeling, new lives, new possible worlds.

What are the *social representations* just mentioned? In the collective elaboration of a community, Serge Moscovici proposed this notion to indicate those symbolic images commonly associated with a specific phenomenon or with a concept characterized by an abstract nature (Farr & Moscovici, 1989, pp. 24-94). For instance, referring to concepts such as religion or communism – explains Marino Livolsi (2000, p. 129) – "each of us could visualize a series of images such as, in the case of communism, a red flag, the faces of Marx and Lenin (...) as well as images of the fall of the Berlin Wall, actually seen (in most cases through the media) or even just fantasized". As can be inferred, the concept of "social representation" complements that of *mainstream* as a common and dominant way of thinking and feeling. In fact, social representations are relational and media constructs helping a community reduce reality complexity in simpler and more manipulable notions such as *images* (Farr & Moscovici, 1989). The second important function of these *container-images* is to offer reassurance to the community. Indeed, associating with a specific image "an unusual aspect of reality means (...) bringing what is unusual and far from us, and therefore potentially threatening and disturbing, within the categorical and conceptual system more familiar to us". Hence, social representations embed this unusual aspect of reality into *mainstream* culture (Livolsi, 2000).

Before delving into the storytelling of *Burning Body* and *Rosa Peral's Tapes*, the dialectic between *mainstream* and *non-mainstream* in contemporary narratives is revealed precisely through the comprehension of social representations in their collective elaboration. In the streaming platforms era, narratives conceived to maximize audience are though disseminated with *non-mainstream* signals. They end up being embedded into a narrative fabric that is still

reassuring for the audience. Just think of the series that have achieved international success and have anti-heroes as protagonists, such as the Spanish series *Money Heist* (*La Casa de Papel*), *Sky Rojo* and *El embarcadero*, the American series *True Detective*, *Fargo*, *Shameless*, *Euphoria* and *The Boys*, the English series *Fleabag* and *Killing Eve*, the Italian series *Baby* and *Gomorra*. Furthermore, as already happened in the evolution of film narration, and as Jessica Balanzategui (2018, p. 674) observes regarding the "new quality TV crime drama" through the words of Jonathan Eburne:

> These shows do not work according to the crime dramas' conventional processes: rational processes of evidence examination and analysis, accompanied by the teleological amassing of plot details to construct a linear sequence of events and thus coherent understanding of criminal motives and acts. Instead, they (…) produce strongest sensations of disorientation and strangeness as a means of "preparing the mind to defend itself against (…) forms of ideological closure". (Eburne, 2008, p. 276)

What happened in the cinema storytelling also happens in TV series storytelling during the streaming era: the narration of emotional distress and social deviance increasingly makes use of strategies of disorientation in the audience. The linearity of the audio-visual narration in the "classic" era (Hollywood style), the one that responds to the rule of the best logical understanding of what happens on the scene is replaced by a deconstruction of the narrative (what happened in European cinema in the 1960s). Deconstruction mimics the psychic and emotional instability of the protagonists in the narrated events. Such characters the instability that disorientates the audience in *Burning Body*. In the TV miniseries written by Laura Sarmiento Pallarés, directed by Jorge Torregrossa and Laura Mañá, and based on the true story of the "Crimen de la Guardia Urbana" of Barcelona, the viewer knows – even before to delve into the narrative – that he had better not count on the logical understanding of the narrated facts.

Burning Body: the erotic object and the moral tale

The audience's disorientation is ensured in the miniseries by a narrative developed on two parallel timelines. The initial scenes in the first episode depict the murdered body being loaded into a car trunk, driven by a pound and set on fire along with the vehicle. After witnessing the marsh fire on the *first* timeline, the viewer follows the movements of the murderous lovers and the enquiry conducted by a detective to uncover the truth about the crime. Simultaneously, on the *second* timeline, the viewer starts witnessing the past events of the protagonist, Rosa Peral: her marital history before the events leading to the murder, her recruitment into the Barcelona Urban Guard, her relationship with colleague Albert, uninterrupted until the killing of the third man in the story, Pedro. Rosa had chosen Pedro as a life partner and stepfather to her daughter without giving up her relationship with Albert. As the episodes progress, the alternation between the two timelines becomes increasingly rapid, challenging the audience to understand whether each new scene depicts present or past events. Typically, to distinguish *flashbacks* from the present timeline, a different tone of photography or marked differences in the protagonists' makeup or hairstyle are used. However, in the case of *Burning Body*, the audience is left with the task of reorienting themselves in each new scene after a moment of confusion.

The viewer's disorientation while navigating between the two timelines reflects the discomfort and imbalance of the central character in the fiction, who is actually named Rosa Peral like the real person but should be interpreted as a *container image*. This attracts a series of narrative, symbolic and emotional instances. It deals with the unique case of a TV series retracing real events shortly after their conclusion while retaining the real names of the main characters. Thereby, the miniseries rightfully falls into the narrative category of *nonfiction* and closely approaches the *true-crime* television genre, shortly to be discussed. Yet, the character of Rosa portrayed by actress Úrsula Corberó should not be taken simply as a "reinterpretation" of the real former police officer convicted of murder alongside her lover in 2020. Instead, it should primarily be understood as a *spectacular object*, meaning an image constructed by the creator-screenwriter, directors and lead actress to attract various identifications and emotional projections from the audience (Morin, 1982, pp. 96-122).

Why does a woman convicted of murder become a *spectacular object*? Firstly, it deals with the reasons why narratives related to crime have always aroused interest. They serve a social function as their representation allows for the collective processing of primitive instincts, satisfies the shared desire for justice in the presence of a sense of threat. Thus, the representation helps confirm (or reconsider) the dominant system of moral values within the community (Young, 2020, pp. 83-97). But in this particular case, the audience has even more reasons for interest. It deals with a character endowed with significant traits. Peral/Corberó is beautiful, sexually uninhibited, even libertine, able to kill and dispose of a corpse. Furthermore, she possesses the "corporeality" derived from being connected to a real-life character. It is no coincidence that in this *container character*, one can trace all the characteristics that were first noted by Paola Bonavitta and Jimena de Garay Hernández (2019, pp. 207-221) and then Ana Corbalán (2023, pp. 192-209) in the most famous character played by Úrsula Corberó, namely the beautiful code-named robber Tokyo, whom the audience has come to know in the Netflix saga *Money Heist*: "unbalanced, desired, brave, impulsive, selfish, solitary, emotional, visceral and hypersexualized". Tokyo is very attractive but at the same time quite unbalanced, to the point of causing irreparable damage to the group of robbers she belongs to. Seemingly, the character suggests an image of emancipation but ultimately succumbs to the spectacular function of the *erotic object*. Therefore, the character falls far short of providing an example of female emancipation (see also the analysis on *mainstream feminism* proposed by Ingrid Luna Lopez, 2023, pp. 42-59; and moreover Rodriguez & Bravo, 2019, pp. 962-976; and Pietaryte & Suzina, 2023, pp. 41-61). Even more than Tokyo, the Peral/Corberó character highlights how a narrative focused on audience maximization leads the audience in a direction diametrically opposed to the path of emancipation, opposed to the expression of one's potentialities and feelings. *Burning Body* constructs the character of a woman who can play the role of a police officer, is attractive, sexually uninhibited, and has the ability to gather multiple men at her feet. Yet, it ultimately places this character in the (moreover "real") role of a *murderer*. In his disordered search for erotic-affective relationships, the Peral/Corberó character is captivating and transgressive enough to ensure the international success of a TV series: see the utility of the *non-mainstream* elements in engaging the audience. At the same time, *Burning Body* functions as a perfect moral tale safeguarding traditional community values. Freedom of sexual behavior is condemned and mad love (*amour fou*) leads to death, as in Pedro's case, or to murder and imprisonment, as in Albert's case. In conclusion, box office success, accurately planned by

a *mainstream* series, thrives on those transgressive and disturbing elements that it claims to stigmatize.

Rosa Peral's Tapes: how a *container image* is born

As mentioned, starting from September 2023, Netflix offers the audience the small *Burning Body Collection* comprising two audio-visual contents. Indeed, accompanying the miniseries is *Rosa Peral's Tapes*, a documentary directed by Manuel Pérez and Carles Vidal that reconstructs the "Crimen de la Guardia Urbana" case, using the *informative* audio-visual language typical of the *true-crime* television genre. Therefore, Netflix's strategy relies not only on the *fictional* potential of the Barcelona case but also on the appetite for *information* that the audience may still have regarding the Rosa Peral's case. But why, from 2017 to the present, does this case still generate media interest in terms of news? The *news values* (Wolf, 1985, pp. 188-219) deployed in the case are indeed evident: "a dog biting a man" is not news, but "a man biting a dog" is. That means that one of the main *news values* is the singularity of the event. Pedro Rodríguez' murder case is the unusual opposite of the stereotypical crime of feminicide. In fact, a woman kills a man. Another element of oddity is the fact that two "guardians of order", two police officers, commit the crime. As mentioned at the beginning, another peculiar element of this crime is the lack of logic, the difficulty in identifying a real *motive* for taking a life. This characteristic gives the case the figure of an *enigma*. Continuing the review of the macabre *news values* of the case, the connotations brutality/sensuality that attract – often at a subliminal level – the projections and identifications of the audience are to be taken into account, just as in the last paragraph. Last but not least, there is another important *news value*: the possibility of transforming a fact not only into news but even into a *saga*, thanks to the abundance of details, sub-plots, and mysteries to be revealed that make up the constellation of a story. This allows news outlets to capture their audience not through a single journalistic service but through a *series* of services, presented as a true series of *episodes* to be consumed over time.

The documentary leverages the same fuel of public interest the journalistic saga had already tapped into and on which the fictional miniseries also relies. However, to distinguish itself from the docuseries *Crims: El Crimen de la Guardia Urbana* directed by Carles Porta (2021) and already broadcast in Spain by TV3, the documentary adopts a perspective that tends to *revise* the public character of Rosa Peral:

> Five years later (the events of 2017) – as explained by the synopsis of the work published by the production company "Brutal Media" – Rosa brakes her silence from prison. The documentary showcases, for the first time, her testimony and unpublished materials from her personal video and photo archine, as well as interviews with her closest circle, the prosecutor and lawyers of the case, and the key journalists who covered the incident. (Brutalmedia.tv, 2023)

There have also been suspicions of a possible imposition by Peral of a documentary approach in her own defence in exchange for the release of her video testimony. That constitutes the journalistic *scoop* emphasized in the work of Manuel Pérez and Carles Vidal (Laura Pérez, 2023). This latter remains, of course, an unverifiable assumption. What is certain and publicly stated is the fact – very impactful from a documentary standpoint – that the two directors

wanted (*A*) to develop a well-defined *thesis* in their film, (*B*) to keep either the thesis they intended to pursue through their film or the presence of Rosa Peral's long testimony in the film hidden from the interviewees. Yet, thanks to this long testimony, Rosa Peral seems to comment the interviewees' words throughout the entire documentary.

> We did not inform the participants that it was a "biased" documentary. (...) We wanted to present the audience a story that was not the one told up to this point. (…) We thought it was important that all the interviewees maintained the same version of their story that they had always declared. We feared that, knowing about Rosa's participation in the documentary, they would alter their story. (…) The goal we set was to show who the woman behind the created monster really was. Moreover, how parallel processes can influence a popular jury during a trial. (Pérez, 2023)

To protest vehemently against the documentary, immediately after its release, were the main interviewees: the public accuser Felix Martin and the two most involved journalists in the Peral case, Toni Muñoz, dedicating an entire book (2019), and Mayka Navarro (Telecinco). "I would never have participated in the documentary", Navarro declared on several occasions, "if I had known that its goal was to question the case and cleanse Rosa Peral's image" (Pérez, 2023). Yet, the choice to conceal the *thesis* of the audio-visual content from those interviewees during the filming places Pérez and Vidal's work in a specific postmodern film category, the *performative documentary* (Seltzer, 2007, p. 16; Scomazzon, 2016, p. 148). This has illustrious precedents still available on streaming platforms today, such as Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), discussed later, Joshua Oppenheimer and Christine Cynn's *The Act of Killing* (2012), and Andrew Jarecki's *The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst* (2015). The performative documentary completely abandons the "utopia of an objective observation, characteristic of classic *direct cinema*" steering the audience's judgment towards proving a specific thesis. This thesis is based "on the subjective interpretation of a reality already filtered by the media" (Scomazzon, 2016, p. 149). In *Rosa Peral's Tapes* all the material used – the interviews conducted by the directors and video documents taken from news coverage during the trial period – is edited with Peral's on-screen commentary. This was to highlight the ways the media constructed the public character of the woman.

In the documentary, numerous statements made by real individuals in corresponding video sequences have a significant impact. For example, the public accuser Martin states during the trial: "Rosa's love relationships can be considered 'evidence' since they can help understand the reasons behind the murder". TV news presenters refer to Rosa as the "Urban Guard Black Widow", a woman with "anti-monogamous pathology" who "cannot stay with one person at time". Furthermore, she is described as "a beautiful woman with promiscuous sexual behaviour", "a charming manipulator capable of keeping three or four relationships simultaneously". The documentary highlights how much the media needed a *container image*, the evocation of a female stereotype with an evidently negative but highly emotional connotation. This was to ensure appeal to the audience and the sustainability of the journalistic *saga*. Faced with the media construction of this female icon of emotional manipulation and sexual promiscuity – a construction that could not but influence the popular jury –, credibility must be given to Rosa's defence lawyer, Olga Arderiu, when she emphasizes that in the Peral's case "we should distinguish *sin* from *crime*". "Indeed", the

previously mentioned journalist Mayka Navarro admits in the documentary, "the situation got out of hand because Rosa's character attracted a series of clichés influencing the trial". Finally, speaking to the camera, Rosa states: "I would like people to know who I really am. (...) If it were a man in my place, no one would dwell on the relationships I've had, and probably everyone would go looking for evidence".

The interesting fact is there's evidence of Rosa and Albert's guilt, but Pérez and Vidal's documentary *omits*. For example, the attempts to mislead the investigation carried out by Rosa using the dead's smartphone, simulating messages sent by him to herself, are not mentioned at all. Moreover, these messages were sent on purpose from the area where her ex-husband Rubén lived. This was to attract the detectives' attention on him. Unlike the miniseries, the documentary does not mention Pedro's blood found on a lightbulb in the room where the murder likely occurred. As is known, during the trial the two former lovers, Rosa and Albert, mutually accused each other of the murder. However, they failed to convince the jury. The jury considered them both equally guilty, with the aggravating factor of premeditation and, in Rosa's case, the aggravating factor of "familiarity", referring to the relationship she had with the victim.

In conclusion, the question to ask is whether is true what Pere Solà Gimferrer asserts (2023): "the documentary contributes to distorting the feminist cause and uses the arguments of a collective struggle for a particular case to which they do not apply". To answer this question, it is useful to refer to the analysis of the *true-crime* genre lead by Ethan Stoneman and Joseph Packer (2020). The latter start their analysis of the aforementioned Errol Morris' documentary *The Thin Blue Line* The New York Times has called "the benchmark for all *true-crime* documentaries working to free unjustly imprisoned individuals" (Bagli, 2019). Errol Morris's documentary examines the sentencing of a man convicted of killing a Texas police officer. It is suggested his innocence to the point of securing his release and initiating the trial of the real culprit (it is no coincidence that Morris's film serves as a model for the acclaimed Netflix true-crime series *Making a Murderer*, directed by Laura Ricciardi and Moira Demos, and released in two seasons in 2015 and 2018). Stoneman and Packer's thesis is that contemporary *true-crime* documentaries are an exercise of extra-legal power that can take the form of "technologically enabled retribution" against a truly guilty individual who escaped punishment, or as the demonstration of the innocence of a falsely accused wrongdoer. This thesis certainly cannot support a content analysis of Pérez and Vidal's documentary regarding the possibility of suggesting Rosa Peral's innocence in the murder of Pedro Rodríguez. Indeed, the widely credible hypothesis is that Rosa and Albert are both guilty and accomplices in that heinous crime. Nevertheless, *Rosa Peral's Tapes* highlights the media lynching to which the private life of the presumed culprit has been subjected. This makes the documentary an extremely interesting witness on the very way in which the media construct a collective representation, a *container image*, to build the narrative appeal. It is not possible to determine whether the media transformation of Rosa into an icon of recklessness influenced the verdict of guilt and premeditation issued by the popular jury. It is a fact that Pérez and Vidal's documentary can indeed be classified in the category of *retributive justice true crime* (Stoneman & Packer, 2020, p. 15). It factually shows the *second* Rosa's trial, the one staged by media to stigmatize the confused and irregular relational life of the main suspect. Disorder and irregularity, once again, are foundational elements of the postmodern moral tale, of contemporary *mainstream* narration.

Conclusions

Following the theoretical approach presented in the first part of this work, two polarities of thinking and feeling operate both in the TV series *Burning Body* and in the documentary *Rosa Peral's Tapes*. It deals with the semantic *closure* vs the *opening* towards new perspectives of thinking and feeling as illustrated in the methodology of this content analysis. It is the semantic closure that prevails in *Burning Body*, where the main character's erotic and affective search cannot be told as the seek of self emancipation and expression. Indeed, this search is led within the reconstruction of a real-life well-known crime case where the main character is identified as the murder from the very beginning. In other terms, the tendency to express the own feelings and sexuality (opening towards new perspectives) is overwhelmed by a murderous tendency inherent in the same staged crime case (semantic closure).

As regards the documentary, the two antithetical tendencies operating in *Rosa Peral's Tapes* are the documentary storytelling objective essence on the one hand; on the other hand, the unscrupulous defense case supported by the documentary authors omitting evidence to guilt. Thus, the documentary in itself acts a semantic closure offering the audience a single point of view, the authors' one. Though, Pérez and Vidal's work stages a different interpretive perspective (Rosa as a media pillory and gender bias victim) compared to the matched Netflix TV series. *Burning Body* is more unscrupulous and shows the spectacular valency relating the binomial brutality/sensuality within the crime of the Guardia Urbana.

From the audience education point of view, *Burning Body Collection* as an audio-visual double product has both an *involutionary* polarity and an *evolutionary* one. The *involutionary* polarity appears by using a heinous crime for entertainment purposes. The *evolutionary* polarity occurs when *Rosa Peral's Tapes* documentary shows the audience that information operators are as unscrupulous as certain storytellers, sacrificing the search for a new way of thinking and feeling to the search for a wider audience.

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