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What is This?



Traveling style: Aesthetic differences and similarities in national adaptations of *Yo soy Betty, la fea*

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Abstract

The global television landscape in the first decade of the 21st century is a complex terrain of contradictory developments and trends. Since the early years of television the United States has been the most important exporter of TV series, TV serials and game shows. But nowadays times have changed. Admittedly the USA is still the leading nation in selling TV fiction all over the world, but since the deregulation of the TV market in Western Europe in the 1990s Great Britain and the Netherlands are the leading exporters of non-fiction formats like reality shows, Australia sells its soap operas all over the world and Latin American countries are important exporters of telenovelas. At the beginning of the 21st century the Colombian telenovela *Yo soy Betty, la fea* made its way around the world. Several countries bought the rights to produce a local adaptation of the format. For example ABC produced *Ugly Betty* in the United States, the German channel Sat.1 produced *Verliebt in Berlin*, and there is a Russian adaptation *Ne Rodis' Krasivoy*. This article compares several local adaptations of the telenovela: the Colombian original and the adaptations in Germany, Russia, Spain and the USA. It looks at the dramaturgical and narrative proximities and differences of the adaptations and focuses on the textual conditions of international success.

Keywords

adaptation, comparative analysis, cultural proximity, genre, hybridity, telenovela, television format, *Ugly Betty*, *Verliebt in Berlin*, *Yo soy Betty, la fea*

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Without a doubt there is a global television market, and international trade in television formats has become an important part of the television business (Havens, 2006; Moran and Malbon, 2006).¹ The 'global media flow' is mainly dominated by American products (Straubhaar, 2007; Thussu, 2007). Europe is the largest export market for US films and television formats. American television programs are broadcast in more than 125 countries (Thussu, 2007). In recent years, however, the dominant position of the American film and television industry has been somewhat undermined. 'While US-based companies remain undisputed leaders in selling TV programs around the world (accounting for more than 70 per cent of all sales), Britain leads the world in the export of television formats' (Thussu, 2007: 18). Furthermore, there are a few other film and television genres that enjoy worldwide distribution: Japanese anime, Indian Bollywood films and Latin American telenovelas (Straubhaar, 2007; Thussu, 2007; Waisbord, 2004). In the early 21st century, what was once a one-way flow of films and television formats from the USA towards the rest of the world has become a complex field of 'multi-directional flows' (Bicket, 2005; Thussu, 2007: 12).

From 2002 on the Colombian telenovela *Yo soy Betty, la fea* made its way around the world (De la Fuente, 2006a). This article deals with a comparative study of the original format and four adaptations. The analysis focuses on issues of cultural proximity, genre proximity, conventions of narration and visual style.

The 'Betty' phenomenon: an overview

Yo soy Betty, la fea is a telenovela written by Fernando Gaitán, produced and broadcast in Colombia by RCN between 1999 and 2001, which tells the story of Betty, an unattractive and unpopular but effective and professional assistant at a fashion design company who falls in love with her charming boss. As well as being broadcast in Colombia, the serial has been aired by Telemundo (one of the biggest Spanish-language American television networks, owned by NBC Universal since 2002), and attained a great degree of popularity, given the size of the US Latin audience reached.

The first season of the original Colombian telenovela, made up of 165 48-minute episodes, has been shown in all the Latin America countries² – the show was so popular that the cast went on tour to meet fans throughout the continent, and in Spain – achieving the same high ratings and fame as the most popular and best-known Brazilian and Mexican telenovelas.

Moreover, the Colombian *Betty* has been dubbed and broadcast in several countries, in Western and Eastern Europe (Italy, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Lithuania), Central and Eastern Asia (from Turkey to India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, China and Japan).

On the other hand, as a scripted format, *Yo soy Betty, la fea* has been sold by RCN to Televisa, the big Mexican broadcaster, which produced it in Mexico with a slightly different title, *La fea más bella*; meanwhile, *Betty* attracted the attention of major media companies like Sony Pictures Television International, Buena Vista International Television and FremantleMedia, which started producing and co-producing the telenovela for the most dynamic and commercially attractive markets.

Sony was the first to buy a license to make adaptations of *Yo soy Betty, la Fea*: the company took advantage of the fact that RCN was not aware of the potential of this serial as a scripted format and hadn't even developed a bible. *La Fea* has been in the Sony format catalogue for a while, traveling around trade fairs and festivals, and has been produced in India (*Jassi Jaissi Koi Nahin*, 2002) and Russia (*Ne Rodis' Krasivoy*, 2005). Both these versions have 'garnered prime-time audience shares ranging between 35 and 40 percent' (Alvarado, 2006).

Adapting a script of a Latin American novela doesn't just mean translating it into a different language. Steve Kent, senior executive vice-president of international production at SPTI, clearly explained the methodology used for the Russian adaptation of *Betty*:

SPTI brought together a group of TV professionals from Russia with Colombian and American writers. 'The Colombian writers knew what the novela was about and worked with the rest of the team to assure that the essence of each scene was captured, but with a Russian flavor.' (Alvarado, 2006)

In 2005 FremantleMedia bought the adaptation rights for the European market. The first adaptation in Europe was *Verliebt in Berlin* (*In Love in Berlin*) in Germany, broadcast from 2005 to 2007 and winning the Rose d'Or in 2006.³ FremantleMedia has also been selling rights to adaptations of this adaptation, dubbing it and selling it to Hungary, with the title *Lisa cask egy van* (*There's Only One Lisa*), where it was aired in 2006.⁴ Besides, Grundy has started new productions of the format in The Netherlands (*Lotte*), in Belgium (*Sara de Roose*) and also in Spain (*Yo soy Bea*).

In the meantime, Sony was trying to translate the *Betty, la fea* format for American audiences. In fall 2001 NBC, together with Sony Pictures TV and with writer Alexa Junge (former exec of *Friends* and *Sex and the City*), developed a half-hour pilot episode based on the telenovela (Adalian and Sutter, 2001). Despite NBC's ambitions to produce a new hit primetime comedy, perhaps with dramatic elements, the project was cancelled; however, 'during the same 2001–02 development season, ABC and Touchstone TV developed the comedy *Less Than Perfect* ... which bears some similarities to the premise of "Betty"' (Andreeva, 2004). Finally, a joint venture between Reveille Productions (previously involved in the format sale to NBC), Ventanarosa⁵ and Touchstone Television gave birth to *Ugly Betty*, a series with 60-minute episodes broadcast on the mainstream network ABC which aimed at a very general audience.

Following its strong rating performance in the US (16.3 million viewers tuned into the season premiere, on Thursday 28 September 2006), the show has been licensed to several territories by Disney-ABC International Television and has been launched in the UK (Channel 4), in New Zealand (on TVNZ's TV2) and Australia (on Seven Network) – its Asia-Pacific debut – making it the highest rated new series in 2007.⁶ *Ugly Betty* has also come back to the same Latin America countries where *La fea* was launched, broadcast on the cable operated channel Sony Entertainment Television. In Colombia, people have seen the US show as 'a pale imitation and an outright counterfeit of the original' (Brodzinsky, 2007); however Gaitán, creator of the telenovela, affirms that while some characters remain and others have been added, the US version has preserved 'the spirit of the original *Betty la fea*' (De La Fuente, 2006b).

Broadening the concept of cultural proximity

Production and distribution of program content takes place across national borders. Television content is a transnational commodity. Of course, there are limitations on the free transnational flow of programming. For example, although the television market is international, television regulatory policy is the prerogative of nation-states. Thus national laws have an influence on programming. So do national television industries and production infrastructures. If a given country has few domestic production companies that are able to produce content for national television networks, then television in that country is more strongly dependent on imported programming than in a country with a highly developed television industry.

As the media industry becomes increasingly globalized, the relationship between the global and the local is important. The concept of cultural proximity, which grew from initial ideas put forward in the mid 1980s (Antola and Rogers, 1984; Hoskins and Mirus, 1988), has been increasingly discussed since the early 1990s (Straubhaar, 1991). Its central idea is that audiences in local markets tend to reject films and television programs that have too little to do with their own cultural reality. They prefer local productions.

Cultural proximity theory argued that countries and cultures would tend to prefer their own local or national production first, due to factors such as the appeal of local stars, the local knowledge required to understand much television humor, the appeal of local themes and issues, the appeal of similar looking ethnic faces, and the familiarity of local styles and locales. (Straubhaar, 2007: 91)

This concept, which originally referred primarily to geo-linguistic boundaries, has since been extended. One reason is that a preference for local and national productions is not found in all parts of a population. Modern societies are widely diverse and audiences have multi-layered identities (see also Straubhaar, 2007: 221ff). They can no longer simply be divided into categories such as lower, middle and upper class. Rather, people live in different milieus, pursue different lifestyles and belong to different communities: imagined communities (Anderson, 1983), aesthetic and reflexive communities (Lash, 1994), proto-communities (Willis, 1990), subcultures (Jenks, 2005; Muggleton, 2000), and fan cultures (Hills, 2002; Sandvoss, 2005). The media preferences that people develop depend, among other factors, on their position in the social field, which is determined in turn by specific economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital that they have acquired over the course of their lives (Bourdieu, 1984). Furthermore, film and television audiences differ in age, ethnicity and gender. All this affects what viewers of television shows prefer. Several studies have found that audiences that are better educated and economically situated have a preference for American series (Mikos and Töpfer, 2006; Straubhaar, 2007). Hence we must postulate multiple proximities between television content and audiences (La Pastina and Straubhaar, 2005; Straubhaar, 2007), applying a more differentiated concept of cultural proximity. Straubhaar (2007) distinguishes between genre proximity, value proximity and thematic proximity. In a 2008 study, however, Trepte examines cultural proximity based on the cultural dimensions of Hofstede (1991),⁷ finding only few cultural differences in a comparison of audiences' preferred series in eight countries. Differences were found, however, in the audiences' past

experience with American fiction programs. Common attributes were found in different countries in which the American series were broadcast in the original language with subtitles, while countries in which the series were dubbed had other characteristics in common. What do these findings signify for the concept of cultural proximity?

Even though the concept has been refined to include the distinction between value proximity and thematic proximity, it remains limited by two essential conditions. First, it refers to the relationship between films or television formats and audiences, and, second, it focuses on the level of representation. Yet the audience is not simply embedded in a general culture that is locally or nationally determined. Rather, it is differentiated into different milieus and lifestyles, and differs in its socio-demographic characteristics. Thus even in the context of local or national cultures it makes no sense to speak of 'the audience'. We are actually confronted with a great number of audiences. This makes it difficult to work with the concept of cultural proximity to a local or national audience.

A similar difficulty arises with regard to representation, since the simple distinction between value proximity and thematic proximity is insufficient to do justice to the vast diversity of representation. Genre proximity, on the other hand, is situated not on the level of representation, but on the level of media experience. People in all parts of the world have grown up with numerous media. For a large part of the world's population, films and television programs are a part of everyday life. Over the course of their lives, they gather experience with these media. They can interpret media codes and are familiar with media conventions. Through their visual experiences, they have gained knowledge of the stylistic instruments and forms of the media. They know the conventions of distinct genres, for example. Yet the audiences' media knowledge also includes knowledge about specific narrative patterns and specific visual stylistic elements such as camera movement, montage, lighting, shot framing and more. Viewers in large parts of the world know the patterns adhered to in soap operas, for example. They know that heavy use is made of close-ups, and that dialog scenes are often rendered visually as shot-reverse shot sequences. Hence visual styles must be integrated in the concept of cultural proximity.

However, in international television trade, audiences' relationship to television formats is influential not only with regard to media use and the processes of producing meaning, but also indirectly, with regard to local adaptations. In addition to original series imported from other countries, domestic adaptations of series and shows are also broadcast in the national markets. In such adaptations, the themes and content, narrative conventions, and visual style of the imported formats are modified to suit the conditions of the local market. Reality shows such as *Big Brother*, *Survivor* and *The Farm* have a common core, but are dramatized in different ways in the various countries in which local adaptations are shown (Mathijs and Jones, 2004; Mikos, 2002; Perrotta, 2007). Adaptations of television programs are '(re-)interpretations and (re-)creations' (Hutcheon, 2006: 172). Transcultural adaptations in the global television market adjust the content and themes of the shows, but at the same time they create hybrid formats which mix together the conventions and vocabularies of different genres.

Moreover, conventions and stylistic elements are not simply added, but integrated. Kilborn (2003) calls this phenomenon an integrated mode of hybridization. 'The "integrated" mode is exemplified by those formats where a more thoroughgoing

amalgamation of styles and approaches has taken place' (2003: 12). In this sense the local adaptations of *Yo soy Betty, la fea* are integrated hybrid formats, since they mix narrative and stylistic conventions from different genres. For this reason, in our comparison of the German, Russian, Spanish and American adaptations of this Colombian telenovela, our analysis focuses on the narrative and dramaturgical structures – that is, what conflicts are dramatized in what ways – and on the use of visual stylistic means. Since this research does not focus on audiences' responses to the aforementioned adaptations, this article will not discuss that body of work, although such important issues like local viewers' reception and readings of the show have been taken into account (Rivero, 2003).

Method

To compare five countries' productions of a television series – *Yo soy Betty, la fea* (Colombia), *Yo soy Bea* (Spain), *Ne Rodis' Krasivoy* (Russia), *Ugly Betty* (USA), and *Verliebt in Berlin* (Germany) – we analysed the first episode of each of the five adaptations.⁸ This approach seemed promising because the beginning of a series must include an introduction of plot and characters. The fundamental conflicts that drive the drama are laid down in the initial episode. We also took a brief look at the second episode of each adaptation to see whether the conflicts introduced were pursued, and whether new major characters were introduced.

Our analysis centered not only on aspects of representation such as the meaning of ugliness, gender or the presentation of the world of fashion, but also on the aesthetic and dramaturgical style in which the story is presented. Our analytical orientation draws on neoformalist film analysis (Bordwell and Thompson, 1993) and structural and functional film and television analysis (Casetti, 1998; Mikos, 2008). The focus of our analysis is always on how stylistic elements of film function in the viewers' reception and assimilation of the show. These stylistic elements include both conventions of visual aesthetics and narrative conventions. We examined what path the heroine follows in her development. At first glance, the *Betty* adaptations are a classic coming-of-age story in which the heroine undergoes a metamorphosis from an ugly duckling into a beautiful swan. In our analysis, we studied the aesthetic-dramaturgical means by which the story is narrated at the audio-visual level.

Comparing the construction of the main character

The name chosen for the protagonist in the various adaptations of our analysis is not always the same one that is given in the original telenovela: Spain and the United States prefer to replace the Colombian Betty (who in reality is called Beatriz Pinzón Solano), with the two protagonists Beatriz Pérez Pinzón, called Bea, and Betty Suarez, while in the Russian and German adaptations, the name is completely different. In fact, the protagonist of the Russian telenovela is called Katya Pushkaryova, while in *Verliebt in Berlin*, the heroine is Lisa Plenske.⁹

Without going into the details of each examined adaptation, we can give a brief cumulative synopsis of the pilot episodes of our sample: Betty (Bea/Katya/Lisa) searches for work and gets in contact with companies where she will try to find herself

a job, with a fashion design company (in the case of Colombia, Russia and Germany) or a fashion magazine (in the case of USA and Spain). The fundamental themes of each first episode – which are organized according to a narrative structure that follows two lines – are the introduction of Betty's family and also a detailed exploration of the management of the company in question and the power relationships within it; on occasion, this world is analysed in the course of a public event (a party, a showcase) and often passes through the magnifying glass of the mass media (newspapers or television services). The main event and turning point of each first episode is the job interview that recurs in all adaptations except for the American series, where it is refused to the protagonist. In the case of the original telenovela, *Yo soy Betty, la fea*, Betty's character is developed by building up tension and anticipation, with an emphasis on the contrast between Betty's appearance and her aspirations.

Since the opening of the series is shot from a subjective point of view (see below), the only element that the viewer comes to know is the voice of Betty, who is not shown; however her voice expresses the personality of the protagonist in a more emotional way, contributing to the build-up of anticipation: in fact her tremulous voice has a hint of shrillness and unpleasantness and gives the impression of profound insecurity and uneasiness that the viewers begin to live internally while the subjective sequence continues.

When Betty is shown, the construction of anticipation ends with a full disclosure of the physical aspect of the telenovela's heroine-to-be: this satisfies one's curiosity and the imagination aligns with reality – is she truly as ugly as we imagined? – producing a kaleidoscope of sense effects.

Likewise, in the Russian telenovela, *Ne Rodis' Krasivoy*, the first impact of Katya is very similar to that with Betty. The Russian girl speaks in a slight and uncertain voice, indicating that she doesn't know how to behave in the situation she has come into. We can feel her tension through the movements of the camera in the first sequence, shot from the subjective point of view while she is on her way to the interview; the tension is exacerbated by the sound of her beating heart, which accelerates as she enters the office. When Katya finally comes into view, she appears to have the same characteristics that confront the viewer of the Colombian telenovela: thick, round glasses, dental braces, an untidy hairstyle and unfashionable clothes; subsequently the head of human resources will say that she is ugly and that she dresses worse than his grandmother (the nickname *grandma* is among the most frequently used epithets in the American series).

The set up and the staging of the opening minutes of the other adaptations we considered is slightly different. For instance, the Spanish and German versions share the choice of opening the pilot episode with a voice-over spoken by the protagonist, who imagines in first person the experience she's going to live and describes her feelings.

Bea, the protagonist of the Spanish adaptation, is immediately on stage through her voice, which is heard over a close-up of a pc monitor. While writing on the computer, posting a message on her blog and addressing her readers '*queridas feonautas*', the gap between what is seen and felt and what is heard and understood is filled when a quick cut to the reverse-shot reveals to us Bea's face (eyes and glasses, the mouth full of braces) and she writes and says she is '*muy fea*'. In all the scenes at the beginning, Bea appears to be distinguished not just because of the way she looks, but mainly because of being a little bit of a geek.

Lisa, the heroine of *Verliebt in Berlin*, is introduced in the first seconds of the episode while she is walking on the streets of Berlin behind another person who is apparently her age, but very different in appearance. Soon the viewer can identify a voice talking of a job interview as the voice of one of the two girls. The ambiguity of the first camera shot that frames them together is effective in enhancing the moment when the impact of Lisa's appearance hits the viewer. Like the other Bettys, Lisa has the braces, the big glasses and pronounced bangs; and, as if this wasn't enough, she dresses in large and unfashionable clothes, that seem as if they don't even belong to her.

The voice-over that accompanies the first scenes and that cyclically returns to re-emphasize the narrative matter (through the out-loud thoughts of Lisa and the blog of Bea), brings to the series a layer of melancholy and self-reflexivity that the Colombian and Russian telenovelas do not possess. The contrast suggested by the brusque passage from the subjective to the objective narrative in the first two examples is a way of representing the comic yet ironic way in which the main character is created. In comparison, Bea and Lisa's characters seem to swerve into a covertly tragic register, in which the sadness of loss, the consciousness of an impalpable condition of social discrimination, and a conflictual relationship with an excessively protective family, all play a fundamental part in the character of the heroine.

Through these two examples of different characterizations of the principal character, we finally come to the American protagonist, Betty Suarez, whose close-up opens the pilot: she is overweight, with red glasses, bushy eyebrows, and a large and sweet smile displaying metal braces, and her wardrobe consists of cheap brightly coloured clothes for which the term 'old-fashioned' is a kindly euphemism. There is no subjective viewpoint, there is no voice-over, but instead an objective narration through dialogue and actions.

In the first two minutes of the series, Betty is shown as a gaudy person with a curious look but also as highly determined and self-confident, longing to get a job in the field she's been aiming for. Some of the themes that will be developed through all the series – the opposition of the socially diverse worlds – are shown from an objective point of view, but not reprocessed or revised through subjective narration strategies. Betty is characterized as a heroine who is slightly unconventional and who fights against the disparities, exploiting the tragic potential of the comic character.

Fitting a tragicomic heroine into genre conventions

The narrative model of telenovelas, where the original story of Betty comes from, can be sketched according to a semantic dimension,¹⁰ a syntactic dimension and a pragmatic one¹¹ (Mandoki, 2002: 188ff.). The syntactic dimension implies, for instance, a predetermined set of characters:

the victim, the protector, the fool, and the villain. The story evolves through typical landmarks and turning points: (1) a radical change of personality or metamorphosis, (2) the revelation of a very consequential secret, and (3) the recognition of identity or *agnition*. (2002: 190, original emphasis)

Although our focus is not on the semantic or syntactic elements of the telenovela, which is actually built on a very long narrative arc of which we are analysing only a small scrap, we think it is necessary to underline how Betty's character is originally imagined and conceived in a partial divergence from the aforementioned syntactic features. Betty is neither a victim nor a protector, neither a fool nor a villain – although these characters appear among the main cast and may also be detected in some of Betty's attitudes (mainly the victim and the fool). As we have already highlighted in the previous section, the Colombian *fea* is built up on a comic register, somehow breaking the convention of the genre and giving the whole serial a 'comic climate' (Mast, 1979) that would be very unusual in a traditional telenovela.

Our aim is therefore to detect that 'series of signs that let us know the action is taking place in a comic world, that it will be "fun" (even if at some moments it will not be), that we are to enjoy and not to worry' (Mast, 1979: 9) about Betty's misfortunes.

Despite her weird look, the Colombian Betty is witty, self-ironic, self-reflexive and deeply conscious of being an 'ugly duckling' but, instead of being focused on herself and on her problems in finding a job, she seems to feel at ease even though she's overtly discriminated against for her looks. What makes the situations in which she appears ridiculous is the occurrence of slapstick moments, where the comedy is nonverbal and mainly built on Betty's clumsiness in doing very basic things like walking in the street and carrying things, as she crashes into people, doors and walls. Her awkwardness, together with her ugliness – which is actually a collection of ugly details on an ordinary girl – makes people laugh.

The Russian Katya is a kind of clown: she wears bizarre clothes, and is fragile, melancholic and somehow enigmatic in her appearance, but often comic in her gestures and expressions, when she is involved in recurring gags or made into an object of mockery by her colleagues. The German telenovela displays Lisa as a sort of alien, coming from the countryside, whose main problem is how to survive in the big city and in an ultra-chic fashion design company. Bea, the Spanish heroine, is the typical geek who was teased because of being an 'A' student at school, unpopular among teachers and pupils, but also because of the way she looks, especially her Groucho-style thick eyebrows and her big glasses. Likewise Betty Suarez, the Mexican-origin girl from Queens, is overweight (the only one in our sample), clumsy and gaudily dressed, but ready to go through humiliating tests in order to be accepted in the Manhattan-style environment of *Mode*.

The slapstick performances and clownish pantomime of these unsophisticated (but good-natured) heroines fill the screen with additional visual information that make the narration more meaningful: matters of life and death, like being ugly, unemployed and somehow repressed by the family, are handled as if they weren't real problems, thereby carrying out a sort of removal. We won't focus here on how the telenovela is expanding its narrative form based on a dramatic structure that, through Aristotle, comes from tragedy. For our purposes it will suffice to say that, with an eye on the representation of the main character of each adaptation, it seems to us that the comic climate infused into their telenovelas the various Bettys¹² can be considered functional in anticipating the happy ending¹³ that the genre requires and the audience is expecting, but is not in accordance with the overall style that is conventional for this TV formula.

Unlike traditional telenovelas *Yo soy Betty, la fea* and its other versions keep progressing toward the main climax of the story, planting a series of comic signs that regularly predict the ultimate radical changes, without inscribing them in a fairytale-style narrative. As a result, these telenovelas display a more innovative style than others, introducing highly unconventional characters and breaking stereotyped formulas in the evolution of the story – but also in lighting and shooting techniques – and turning out to be thoroughly enjoyed by multilayered audiences. Research on audiences' readings of *Betty's* narrative, for instance, shows that its success is a 'product of the *telenovela's* thematic construction' and 'a possible result of audiences' desire for diverse themes and representation of "womanhood" in the *telenovela* genre' (Rivero, 2003), which includes comedy as part of the narrative.

As far as the drama *Ugly Betty* is concerned, it clearly keeps its distance from the telenovela model, as well as from soap opera – its American counterpart. However, the 'dramedy' shares themes and plot developments with both the telenovela and the soap opera.

Comparison of dramaturgy and aesthetics

In the four adaptations and the original version, the tragicomic heroine is visually introduced in different ways. In the Spanish and American adaptations, the viewers' attention is immediately directed to Betty's appearance, but in the Colombian and Russian adaptations, she is not visible at all in the beginning. Instead, the latter adaptations use a subjective camera and point-of-view shots, as Bordwell and Thompson (1993) have described:

We might see shots taken from a character's optical standpoint (the point-of-view shot) or hear sounds as the character would hear them (what sound recordists call 'sound perspective'). This would offer a greater degree of subjectivity, one we might call *perceptual subjectivity*. (1993: 78, original emphasis)

In Colombia and Russia, the viewers are drawn in to the story through the subjective point of view of Betty's character. In both of those countries, we follow her point of view as she goes to the building of the fashion firm (called *Eco Moda* in Colombia, *Zimaletto* in Russia). We see the reactions to Betty's appearance on the faces of passers-by, security personnel, employees of the fashion company, and other applicants for the job opening as secretary at the company. The viewers don't know at first what causes those reactions. In the Russian adaptation, passers-by also comment on Katya's appearance. In both the Colombian and the Russian versions, it is not until about four and a half minutes into the episode that the viewer first sees Betty or Katya on screen. The first shot of her occurs during her job interview, in which her 'beautiful' rival (Patrizia in Colombia; Viktoria in Russia) is also present. In both adaptations, the main character appears in a medium shot. Up to that point, the viewers' attention is directed in medium shots and close-ups to the outward charms of the competing applicants. As the interview continues, the camera comes closer to Betty or Katya, and calls attention to her glasses and the braces on her teeth – accessories designed to underscore her ugliness. In the American adaptation *Ugly Betty*, the point-of-view technique is used only later in the

first episode to show the reactions of the people present when Betty enters the fashion magazine's cafeteria for the first time.

The American and Spanish adaptations both begin with close-ups of Betty's face. After just 30 seconds, the Spanish viewers' attention is drawn to Bea's glasses and braces, shown in an extreme close-up. *Ugly Betty* begins with a medium close-up of the main character. The German adaptation begins, after the title sequence, with an establishing shot of Potsdamer Platz in Berlin. The next shot shows an exit of the train station there, where the main character Lisa is one of the crowd streaming towards the escalator. Only gradually does the camera pick her out of the crowd. On the sound level, however, we already hear Lisa's voice-over narration of her application for a job as an executive assistant at Kerima Moda and of her arrival in Berlin. The voice-over narration can be taken as an 'internal commentary reporting the character's thoughts', or, in the words of Bordwell and Thompson (1993: 78), as 'mental subjectivity'. The Spanish adaptation also uses voice-over in the opening sequence. In the visual introduction of the main character, however, there are strong similarities between the Colombian and Russian adaptations on the one hand, and between the American and Spanish versions on the other. The voice-over narration is a common feature of the German and Spanish adaptations. In all versions except the US one, the viewers are familiarized with the heroine through perceptual or mental subjectivity, that is, by lending the viewer the main character's point of view. Only the US adaptation does not present the character's subjective point of view. The US viewers, introduced to the protagonist through medium close-ups and close-ups, come visually very close to the character, but remain in the position of an observer watching the action from outside. In the opening sequences, dialog is used to portray Betty's family relationships.

Where there is no subjective narration – Spain, USA, Germany – the construction of the anticipation of the attributes of the main character comes explicitly scripted in the reactions of other characters, who often meet Betty only after having heard her speak or after reading her job application. Through either an internal point of view or an objective gaze on the protagonist, the format guarantees that the viewer immediately focuses attention on the main character, whose physical look, not beautiful and clashing with the canons of the environment in which she finds work, is quickly put on the back burner, replaced by the unlimited resources of her personality.

The Russian adaptation adheres closely to the original Colombian version in its dramatic and visual structure, that is, both in the chronological sequence of events and in the way they are presented. For example, knowledge about personal relationships and ties in *Eco Moda* and *Zimaletto* fashion companies is communicated in comparable ways. In both versions, the main character sits at home and leafs through a fashion magazine that reports on a company event. The magazine's photos are visible on screen, including one of the young CEO with his father and his wife. These photos then become the starting point of a flashback to the events reported on in the magazine. The cut to the flashback is styled both visually and aurally as the flash of a photographer's camera. This stylistic device is used repeatedly to cut both from the fashion event to Beatriz's or Katya's home and back again. In this way the viewers are provided with the same initial knowledge as the protagonist about the interpersonal structures in the company. As the episode continues, however, the viewers soon come to know more than the heroine by observing the

characters' actions. For example, the viewers know that the young executive's fiancée is trying to get a girlfriend to win his confidence in order to spy on him. Similarly, the heroine does not share the viewers' knowledge that her rivals for the job at the fashion company have completely different motives from her in competing for the young executive's favor. The Spanish adaptation also makes use of a fashion magazine. Here, however, the protagonist Bea is applying for a job with the magazine itself, not with a fashion company. The images of the fashion magazine are used in the Spanish version to visualize Bea's inner desires: the scene contains a dream sequence in which she kisses her future boss. Information about the relationships between people who work at the fashion magazine is conveyed in scenes set at the office. Flashbacks are often used in the Spanish version as well, while the American and German adaptations do without flashbacks. They convey the necessary knowledge to the viewers in the course of the linear plot. Under these circumstances, the viewer attains knowledge that the heroine does not have through the alternating narration of parallel story lines.

A thorough discussion of all the audiovisual stylistic elements – title sequences, setting, editing style, camera style, visual effects, the visual presentation of dialogue and the soundtrack – is beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, a look at a few of the differences and similarities between the adaptations and the original is informative. The comparison shows that the adaptations are produced in relation to dramaturgical and narrative traditions in every country.

Conclusion: hybrid formats, genre conventions and local adaptations

Dramaturgical and audiovisual conventions are components of film and television genres. A genre incorporates a set of conventions that are familiar to audiences, that the audience expects. Telenovelas narrate a complete melodramatic story (Lopez 1995; Martín-Barbero 1995) in 100–300 episodes. Unlike daily soaps, which are based on an endless story line (Bielby and Harrington 2005; Cantor and Pingree 1983), most telenovelas are oriented towards a happily-ever-after.

Although there are local differences between telenovelas from Brazil, Mexico and other Latin American countries, these differences are more often situated on the level of representation, not of narrative and audiovisual style. The basic melodramatic tone of the story makes telenovelas a serious genre. And yet, in the late 1970s, a comic sub-genre of the telenovela began to develop, primarily in Brazil (Tufté 2000: 112f.). Since then, comedy has become established as a component of telenovelas. This component is due, among other factors, to the influence of US comedy series on the narrative patterns.

Beatriz, the heroine of the Colombian telenovela *Yo soy Betty, la fea*, marks the introduction of a tragicomic protagonist whose story follows original conventions of the melodramatic telenovela, but whose character belongs to the comic structures and the comic climate of comedy series. This is one reason for the international success of the format and its adaptations.

The different adaptations show different ways of mixing telenovela and comedy ingredients. While the Spanish adaptation gives greater weight to the telenovela aspects, and the German remains close to the original Colombian proportions of telenovela and

comedy components, the US and Russian adaptations allow the comedy elements to predominate. Akass and McCabe (2007) go so far as to characterize *Ugly Betty* as a 'styl-ish US hit comedy'.

As maintained by Savorelli:

Ugly Betty deploys another way for comedy to become a lens through which a certain reality can be observed, only to be filtered once again by the commitment to a different textual genre. The telenovela genre rises as a form of access to certain cultural contexts and their value systems, with definite textual boundaries – contrary to soap opera, which has no such delimitations. The comic coating *Ugly Betty* gives the telenovela highlights even further the exacerbation of some of this genre's features, without necessarily devaluing its ability to represent the real... Comedy is the glue that allows the series – far from being an accumulation of 'situations', but rather a single narrative progression – to sustain the entire load, albeit often taken to extremes. (2008: 174)

The US adaptation can also be seen as an example of the 'telenovela-ization of US soap operas' (Bielby and Harrington, 2005).

Ugly Betty reinvigorates and diversifies the serial dramedy form as it absorbs codes and conventions from elsewhere. Such transformation is not startling, but emerges only gradually in its bold visual style, representational types, proliferation of new identity politics and (cultural) values while paradoxically continuing to adhere to prevailing US TV forms (narrative structure, generic format ...). (Akass and McCabe 2007)

Yo soy Betty, la fea and its local adaptations show features of hybrid formats inasmuch as they integrate elements of different genres in the basic telenovela structure, up to and including a genre shift towards the comedy series as in the USA. In this way the format meets the requirements of the global television market, since its various elements can be mixed differently in each local adaptation without excessively altering the basic structure of the original brand.

Hence genre proximity is no longer necessary to ensure international success in times where hybrid formats are getting more important in the global market. These formats mix known genre conventions, which are well known to audiences all over the world because of their experience of the diversity of television (and film) genres. The knowledge of genre conventions is part of the media literacy of audiences that grew up with television as part of their everyday life. Yet in countries where a given genre has a long tradition, it is important for local adaptations to remain true to the genre. The fact that the Russian adaptation closely follows the Colombian original may have to do with the fact that telenovelas have enjoyed wide popularity in Russia since the 1990s (Baldwin 1995). By the same token, the telenovela-ization of US soaps is aimed both at their success among the Latino population of the US, which exhibits close proximity to telenovelas, and at their success among the Anglo population, which is familiar with the conventions of soap operas as well as drama and comedy series.

Thus the driving force behind the hybridization of television formats can be found not so much in television producers' creativity as in the market and its variety of audiences with their media literate knowledge of narration and visual styles. Local

adaptations have to be aware of the complexities of flows and contra-flows in the traveling of style. Our research shows evidence that there is a complex web of similarities and differences between local adaptations of the same format. Even a traditional genre like telenovela is nowadays transformed by integrating conventions from other genres into a hybrid format.

As we have seen above, *Yo soy Betty la fea* draws from different genres like drama series and situation comedy, slapstick and fairy tale, soap operas and reality TV with regard to dramaturgy, narration and audiovisual style. 'The significant dynamic of the present era in television is adaptation, transfer, and recycling of content' (Keane, Fung and Moran 2007: 75). The examples of *Yo soy Betty la fea* and its various adaptations show that it is also possible to recycle single stylistic elements of different genres and combine them in unique ways. Therefore, the more hybrid a format is, the more flexible it is to local adaptation dynamics, the more it is able to attract diverse audiences all over the world.

Notes

- 1 This chapter has been entirely developed and completed in collaboration. However, for practical reasons the authors are responsible for different sections: Mikos for those on cultural proximity, methodology and dramaturgical and aesthetic comparison, Perrotta for those on the Betty phenomenon, the staging of the character, the conflicts and the tragicomic heroine. The introduction and the conclusions are the result of our collaborative work. We would like to thank Hugh O'Donnell and Yulia Yurtaeva for the copy and translation of the Russian adaptation.
- 2 In Mexico *Yo soy Betty, la fea* was a significant exception to the rule that foreign telenovelas are not accepted by the Mexicans (De La Fuente, 2006a). Also, a remake of *Yo soy Betty, la fea*, titled *El amor no es como lo pintan*, was produced in 2000 for TV Azteca.
- 3 The German producer Grundy UFA bought the original Colombian scripts from RCN, even though FremantleMedia owns the rights for the adaptation and Grundy UFA is a subsidiary of FremantleMedia.
- 4 This version has been dubbed in French, entitled *Le Destin de Lisa (Lisa's destiny)*, and has been broadcast on TF1, on the Belgian RTL-TVI and the Télévision Suisse Romande.
- 5 Ventanarosa is a production company owned by the former telenovelas star Salma Hayek.
- 6 Other strong performances include those on Norway's TVNorge, Malaysia's 8TV, Singapore's Channel 5, Hong Kong's TVB Pearl and Sweden's Kanal 5, not to mention Spain's Cuatro and Italy's Italia1. See WorldScreen (2007)
- 7 Hofstede separated four cultural dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity.
- 8 To compare adaptations we needed to analyse the Colombian prototype; then we chose two countries that seem to be culturally distant from the Colombian telenovela (Russia and Germany) and two countries that, at first sight, are culturally proximate for cultural and linguistic reasons (Spain and USA, because of Latino population and the history of program exchange between Latin America and USA). Originally we also planned to analyse an Italian adaptation titled *Betty la cozza*, which Grundy had announced for the end of 2007. But the production has been inexplicably stopped.
- 9 In the sense of cultural proximity, the choice of the names for the heroines has to be close to the cultural history of the country where the adaptation takes place: Leticia in Mexico, Jasmeed in India, Maria in Greece, Lotte in the Netherlands, Sara in Belgium, Esti in Israel,

- Nina in Bosnia/Croatia/Serbia, Gönül in Turkey. Katka in the Czech Republic, Ula in Poland, Wu Di in China, Bela in Brazil, Alice in Portugal and Huyền Diêu in Vietnam.
- 10 As maintained by Mandoki, the semantic dimension implies that the story is built on four main pillars: the moral order (the bad must pay for their misdeeds, the good must atone for their good luck), the exhibition of hyperbolic emotions, the characters' ability to have feelings and the restoration of family harmony after its conflicts have been displayed.
 - 11 In the pragmatic dimension telenovelas build their relationship with the audience, whose interest in the genre is increased through performing style and aesthetics rather than simply the interpretation of meaning.
 - 12 Four out of the five examples we have analysed may be formally classified as telenovelas (the Colombian, the Russian, the Spanish and the German versions): each season comprises a defined number of episodes (between 150 and 300 each season) that last between 20 and 40 minutes. *Ugly Betty* has the format of a classic TV drama: 23 episodes of 42 minutes, twice the usual length of a situation comedy.
 - 13 In *Yo soy Betty, la fea* the happy ending involves a radical change of Betty's looks and a love affair (marriage) with her boss. Lisa in *Verliebt in Berlin* and Katya in *Ne Rodis' Krasivoy* have the same happy ending, while in *Yo soy Bea* the main character does not go through a physical metamorphosis, although she wins the love of her boss.

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