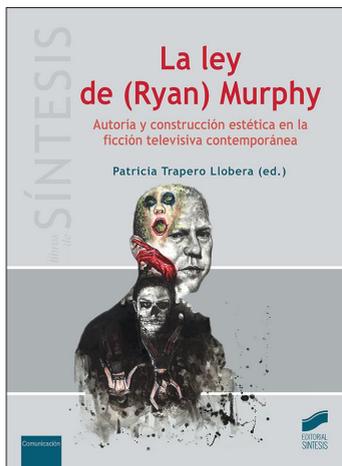


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(Ryan) Murphy's Law

Review of: Patricia Trapero Llobera (ed.), *La ley de (Ryan) Murphy. Autoría y construcción estética en la ficción televisiva contemporánea*. Editorial Síntesis, Madrid: 2017.



Starting from the idea of authorship around the key figure of the show-runner as a protagonist of the contemporary TV fiction landscape, the volume edited by Patricia Trapero Llobera – a Senior Lecturer with expertise in theatrical, television and transmedia products and the connections between them within current media – addresses the TV fiction as a complex, postmodern environment. Thus, the techniques employed can be associated with the postmodern tools, the creator working with pre-existing fictional patterns and symbolism. These are reinterpreted in a specific creative way, focusing (as they are based on a serial approach or design) on continuity in terms of narratives and character evolution. Focusing on what it calls “one of the most innovative figures in the television industry” (15), the current collective work – a consistent, multidimensional media studies analysis on Ryan Murphy’s work – explicitly aims to establish the framework for a “rigorous debate” on different feasible approaches to be applied to fiction in recent television products. As its introduction states, the work

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deals with narrative, aesthetic and cultural approaches, discussing the corpus of TV series in question on the background of Postmodern visual products. The volume focuses on the theatrical, aesthetic and thematic aspects defining the “Murphyan poetics” (*poetica murphyana*) as well as creating a “Murphyan mythology” (15).

The work is based on consistent academic research, as one of the results of a team project funded by a Spanish national research programme. Thus, the research for the volume was developed within the framework of the project *The Role of TV Fiction in the Processes of Identity Construction in the 21st Century* (*El rol de la ficción televisiva en los procesos de construcción identitaria en el siglo XXI*), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (the Spanish National 2013-2016 Research and Development Program, reference FFI2014-55781-R).

Adapted to the topic of TV series creation and to the area of media studies in general, as an extremely dynamic and appealing field of studies, the research conducted by this team has also offered – as one of the most visible and accessible interfaces for the results of the project – a website, <http://www.rirca.es/> (*Representation, Ideology and Reception in Audiovisual Culture – RIRCA*). This offers reviews and articles concerning the novelties and progress of TV series and cinema, but also other media products such as videogames etc. Similarly to the volume, a category of texts on the website cover important figures in the media industry under the category *Nombres propios* (*Proper Nouns*).

The current volume, although stemming from the same research background, is, however, differently oriented in terms of target audience, being an academic work based on complementary approaches and conceptual tools, thus resulting in a multifaceted study of what is a polyvalent figure of the current TV landscape. It is also meant to cover a gap, identifying the absence of monographs on the showrunner in question, with the exception of the Whedon Studies Association and two postgraduate-oriented journals (*Slayage* and *Watcher Junior*). This exclusive focus on the work of Ryan Murphy is related to the interest in the idea of authorship within the TV products. Again, designed as multifaceted although monographic, the volume is designed to cover three main sections: the first line of research addresses the narrative architecture of Murphy’s productions, on which the editor herself offers a minute analysis. A second direction focuses on analysing the elements that define the formal system of what the volume calls “*la factoria Murphy*” (“*the Murphy factory*”), inquiring on the different approaches towards the television aesthetics. The authors dealing with this aesthetics within the director’s room as well as with the concepts of monstrosity and eccentricity as related to the neobaroque are Nuria Vidal and Iván Bort. The third section consists of case studies, discussing recurrent themes and motifs in the Murphyan imagination, based on cultural studies and transmedia conceptual tools and methodologies.

What is perhaps the key analysis on which the volume is built is the study dedicated by Patricia Trapero to the narrative architecture(s) in Murphy’s dramaturgy

(dramaturgia), in the author's own words. She departs from the idea of authorship and auteur, adding the label of "corporate brand" (marca corporativa) which would include both the industrial and the creative layers. Trapero discusses the evolution of the figure of the producer, director and actor as corporate brands and the manner in which the creative process has evolved within the television environment, regarding a shared versus an individual perspective or vision.

In Murphy's case, which is, however, not isolated (the author speaks of a second Golden Age of television, which is based on serial thinking, p. 37), the creative ego has marked the products, accepting a form of symbiosis (31) with a small team of three or four "strong collaborators, lieutenants, a team support to come your dream to life" (THR, 2017, qtd. in Trapero 31). The analysis works with a general-to-specific essay development, starting with the concept of showrunner and the creative patterns related to the media products, as well as other concepts such as the screen idea system or corporate brand, and then minutely dissecting the manners in which Murphy has constructed a fictional system. This is difficult to analyse as it is also in progress, in a sort of organic expansion and therefore even more difficult to grasp. Trapero observes the connection between the changing paradigms in the television creation process and this extremely personal creative system, in which the obsessions and symbolism, all related to the topics of the day (gender and sexual issues, mainly) are based on the "research library" (23) and on the intellectual background of the auteur. A particularly interesting section of this key study (which approaches the very resistance structure, the recurrences and key elements defining this "Murphyan imagination" or imaginario murphyano, resembling a fractal) is 1.3. Del screen idea system a la poética: arquitectura(s) narrativa(s) en la dramaturgia de Ryan Murphy. The text departs for the very idea of storyworld as leading to a recognisable system or poetics. Another concept the author employs is dramaturgy understood as consisting of "different mechanisms employed by the creator for the construction of the narrative strategies that unify his mental world with the audience or with 'that' of the audience. The dramaturgy must be considered, thus, as a dialectic process in the Brechtian understanding – and Eisensteinian, in its cinema version – of the term between a world representation offered by a creator and a manner of interpreting it achieved by the viewers/audiences that construct or reconstruct their own film-play-TV fiction." ("los distintos mecanismos utilizados por un creador para la construcción de las estrategias narrativas que unas su universo mental con el espectador o con "el del" espectador. La dramaturgia deberá ser considerada, pues, como un proceso dialectico en el sentido brechtiano – y eisensteiniano, en su vertiente cinematográfica – del término entre una representación del mundo propuesta por un creador y un modo de interpretación realizada por los espectadores/audiencias que construirán o reconstruirán su película-obra de teatro-ficción televisiva particular.", 30) A worldview achieved through a symbiosis between the script and staging. In the case of Ryan Murphy, this personal involvement within the narrative formula is obvious

into the minutest details such as the pilot episode or the teasers (designed to offer a Pavlovian effect, as Murphy himself names it, 31).

As far as the specificity of the Murphyan structures is concerned, Trapero labels them as labyrinthic, accompanying eccentricity within what she calls a “polyphonic cosmovision” in terms of character and theme evolution, and a “polyhedral perspective” (34) on behaviours and emotions. These labyrinthic narrative structures are developed through “unfoldings, mutations, repetitions, evolutions, variations” (Sanders 2016 qtd. in Trapero 34) in what the author labels as fractal-shaped and marked by postmodern techniques such as the pastiche. “An imagination fuelled by fictions that are fruits of the hybridization of very diverse canonical genres and the use of the pastiche as a form of creating new systems, codes and traditions departing from systems, codes and traditions established by previous works” (“Un imaginario que es suministrado por las ficciones fruto de la hibridación de géneros canónicos muy diversos y de la utilización del pastiche como creación de nuevos sistemas, códigos y tradiciones a partir de sistemas, códigos y tradiciones establecidos por obras previas”, 35).

The intertextual approach is based of major cinema references and works even at the character level (what the author calls “una esquema actoral intertextual”, 53) as well as to the intextuality of casting (54). There is also a hypertextual network, resulting from the fragmentariness of the serial-structure (“the seriality, understood as a plot that, thanks to its fragmentary structure is finally organised as a hypertextual network” / “la serialidad, entendida como trama que gracias a su estructuración fragmentada se organiza, finalmente, como una red hipertextual”, 57). specific to the current media, new media and transmedia landscapes. This changes the focus – in what was called in the volume “the second Golden Age of television” (37) – from a passive reception to an inclusive form of worldbuilding which transgresses media (tourism is one example). After detailing the systematic view of the showrunner in a series of classifications and examples related to the previously called labyrinthic structures, Trapero concludes that Ryan is a first-hand innovator, deeply related to the most topical issues and the zeitgeist, creating a poetics based on three axes: the first, the knowledge and familiar aspects of the audiences or what she calls “el saber enciclopédico de las audiencias”, 74), the second, the socio-historical moment in which his works are released, combining different narrative patterns into specific architectural structures (75) and, the third, an industrial axis.

As mentioned above, in a second section of the volume Nuria Vidal Trapero and Iván Bort Gual address the Murphyan aesthetics and formal system, departing from the idea of authorship, which renders Murphy’s works paradigmatic (Bort 125). In *The directors’ room: la estética neobarroca y la monstruosidad formal del universo murphyano*, Nuria Vidal works with the correlation between narrative contents and visual aesthetics, emphasising that development of concepts such as the fragmentariness, excess, stylistic virtuosity and monstrosity in the construction of the

Murphyan fictional world (77), which she discusses as cinematic and iconographic. In his chapter, *La guarida de la perversión*, Bort extracts, in order to analyse, the opening sequences, considered as representative in a metonymic understanding and considered, methodologically, as “secuencias-tipo” or “secuencias-paradigma” (126). In the third section, interested in approaching the specific series with cultural studies and media studies tool, María Isabel Menéndez and Rubén Jarazo approach aspects related to the body, sexuality and gender (masculine subjectivities in Jarazo’s case). Thus, Menendez discusses, using Nip/Tuck as a case study, the identity construction within the context of contemporary (and more particularly so in relation to fame and the media) obsessions for beauty, perfection and plastic surgery as a form of achieving the former and overcoming, transcending the imperfect or flawed body (“cuerpo imperfecto o ‘defectuoso’”145). The text works with the idea of body change and (re)construction conceived as a project, using an interesting theoretical and conceptual apparatus related to the topic of the body. Rubén Jarazo’s text on masculine subjectivity and homosexuality (“homosexualidades problemáticas”, as he calls them) uses two of Murphy’s most known works, *Glee* and *American Horror Story*, to discuss the connection between the process of representing, regulating and legitimising sexual identities and gender in the television discourse and, moreover, in relation to the American dream. As Jarazo, emphasises, these series suggest a revision of the representation of masculinity in the cinematic perspective and discusses the manner in which the series chosen for the case studies work with this representation of the masculine body and the above-mentioned change in perspective, a shift which the author emphasises as significant and representative for today’s audio-visual products. Josep Oliver Marroig and Ignacio Pillonetto analyse the aspects related to humanism and post-humanism (as theoretical frameworks for rethinking identity and otherness) in Murphy’s *American Horror Story*, discussing the references to ghosts and, in general, supernatural phenomena and entities (182). Maria Isabel Escalas Ruiz uses the same cultural product (*American Horror Story*) in order to discuss perversity in relation to childhood, seen as the narrative epicentre of the new horror as well as “generator and receiver” of evil in the mentioned series. Departing from Foucault’s perspective on historicity, Juanjo Bermúdez de Castro changes the focus of study towards the historical contextualization of the narrative discourse, using as an environment some of Murphy’s works (*The Normal Heart*, 2014 and *The People v. O. J. Simpson: American Crime Story*, 2016) in relation to the HIV crisis in the 80s. Finally, Ignacio Bergillos García returns to some concepts anticipated by Trapero in her chapter, authorship and participatory culture in relation to today’s media and, more so, to the transmedia approach, transgressing the borders of the media product towards other platforms and engaging the audiences in alternative formulas of interaction with the fans. The chapter, and the volume itself, speak of diversity and openness in audience-oriented products, combining sophisticated cinematic references with postmodern tools in a constantly topical project, which although in

progress reveals a recognisable architecture. The volume, cleverly titled, manages to fulfil an ambitious goal: speak in minute details and with academic substance and in a systematic approach about a current media phenomenon which would appear difficult to grasp through its novelty and volume (the serial thinking aspect discussed above). However, the goal is achieved and the systematic, classifying approaches and detailed analyses (such as the minute study of openings and credit titles) create an interesting and engaging material for the readers interested in Murphy's work and, in general, in the current television landscape.