

Transnational success made in Spain

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Transnational Success Made in Spain

COLLECTION:
WATCHING THE
TRANSNATIONAL
DETECTIVES

ARTICLES –
COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE

ANJA LOUIS



ABSTRACT

Police dramas are one of the most important genres on television, both to represent social issues and reflect ideological changes. Spanish crime dramas peaked in the 2000s and boasted huge, home-grown success stories, achieving higher ratings than US imports. However, after the economic crisis in 2008 and subsequent cuts to television budgets, Spain's TV producers had to seek international opportunities. Creating a virtue out of necessity, an increasing number of drama producers were going global and beginning to reap the rewards of international ventures. One such venture is *Los misterios de Laura/The Mysteries of Laura* (2009–14), a wonderfully light-hearted crime comedy about Police Inspector Laura Lebré, a divorced mother of twins with a chaotic personal and professional life. This article examines the Televisión española and the American NBC productions *Los misterios de Laura* and *The Mysteries of Laura*, respectively, in order to explore the dis/continuities of this transnational success formula, focusing on three key issues: female police officers, office politics, and working mothers. Central to my discussion will be the significance of humour in the workplace as a meaning-making cultural practice. I use humour theories from TV and Critical Management studies to ascertain the main and sometimes subtle differences in the representations of a working mother's life.

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At a recent critical legal conference, I was introduced to a mature PhD student, a Spanish national who lives in Finland. When I mentioned that I was working on *Los misterios de Laura*/*The Mysteries of Laura*, she replied: “Oh that’s an American TV series that Televisión española has turned into a Spanish version”. I was then told that the American original was much better than the supposedly Hispanicised remake, which she considered a bad imitation. When asked what made it better, I did not get any concrete answers other than the generalising “everybody-knows-US-TV-is-better” argument. She was surprised to hear that the original version is the Spanish, and the American is the copy. Our conversation sums up rather nicely the common assumption that it is a one-way traffic system: America produces, Spain consumes. Millie Buonanno has long warned of this reductionist view of the cultural imperialism paradigm and takes issue with the notion that the quantity of US TV imports is proof that there is a demand for such shows. US TV shows are sold in packages, and not all the shows within a package are equally popular. Therefore, their prevalence on programme schedules reflects the offer rather than demand (Buonanno 34–6). Spanish crime dramas peaked in the 1990s and 2000s and boasted huge, home-grown success stories, achieving higher ratings than US imports.¹ However, following the economic crisis in 2008 and subsequent cuts to television budgets, Spain’s TV producers had to seek transnational opportunities. Creating a virtue out of necessity, an increasing number of drama producers were offering their home-grown TV series and beginning to reap the rewards of international ventures.² One such example is the prize-winning series *Los misterios* premiered on 27 July 2009 which was an instant success, with higher viewing figures than the rival of the night *CSI*. Originally conceived of as a single season of six episodes, three seasons were broadcast at primetime on TVE’s La 1 (2009–14). Season 1 in 2009 reached viewing figures of 2–3 million (12–16% share); season 2 in 2011 consisted of 13 episodes, reaching 2.4–3.7 million (12–20% share); season 3 in 2014 consisted of 13 episodes, reaching 2.5–5 million (15–30% share). Such was its success that it has been sold to such diverse markets as the Netherlands, Italy, Russia, and the United States. Transmedia products were created to provide the audience with an enriched media experience, for instance a prequel book (*El misterio de la isla de las gaviotas* [The Mystery of Seagull Island], which tells the story of Laura’s and Jacobo’s relationship), a video game, and an app in which you help Laura find the clues and solve the mysteries (“[Los misterios de Laura](#)”).

This article examines the Televisión española and NBC productions of *Los misterios* and *The Mysteries*, respectively, to explore their dis/continuities. Comparative analyses are often disadvantaged by lack of language skills and therefore perpetuate the Anglo-American hegemony. This article interrupts this hegemony and fulfils the dual purpose of contributing to both Hispanic studies and the international body of TV studies. As Gupta (101) rightly suggests, there is particular value in the comparison of two texts with considerable cultural difference—be it perceived or real. After a few observations about the transnational remake and women as producers of humour, this article focuses on three key gender issues: female police behaviour, office politics, and working mothers. Central to my discussion will be the significance of humour in the workplace as a meaning-making cultural practice. As a theoretical frame I use humour theories from TV and Critical Management studies. Positioned at the intersection between American and European TV studies, it gives space to a productive cross-fertilisation of transcultural gender debates.

THE TRANSNATIONAL REMAKE

Debates on the remake’s originality and creativity are not my concern here. Taking terms such as “remake” or “adaptation” and “original” at face value suggests an uneven creative process and ignores the possibility of intertextual inspirations. Laura Lebel’s *modus operandi* is reminiscent of the cosy detective Miss Marple: well-mannered with a positive outlook on life, always trying to understand human frailty when looking for murder motives. The scriptwriters, having been partly educated at American universities, were heavily influenced by the Anglo-

¹ For further details, see Louis (179–93).

² Smith (14) argues that even as early as the 2000s Spanish production companies were already amongst the highest exporters, overtaking French and German exports.

American classics, and to a certain extent the parodic nod to a number of iconic series is a homage to the Marples, Holmeses, and Columbos of the detective world. It is important to note that the original “can be seen as *already a remake* of existing discourses, tropes, quotations, and allusions alongside narrative components and generic features” (Proctor 6). The transcultural flow starts with the Anglo-American classics being transposed into a different meaning-making culture (i.e. Spain), only to be transported back into US culture.

Buonanno suggests that inherent in any televisual flow is a transnationalisation of products around “pieces” of distinct cultures (Buonanno 15). For example, the intertextuality in *Los misterios* can be seen as a series of tributes to famous Anglo-American crime narratives (e.g. *12 Angry Men* (S1E12) or *And Then There Were None* (S2E18-19)). Covert intertextuality in the form of parody, genre allusion, and symbolism can also be found in *Los misterios*. For instance, the resolution scenes are suggestive of Agatha Christie murder mysteries, when the detective gathers all the suspects and exposes the murderer. This intertextuality creates meaning, reinforces the text’s themes, and places the work within a transcultural context. The appropriation of Anglo-American crime formats is reformulated to chime with Spanish signifying practices (Buonanno 20). To a certain extent, *Los misterios* is implicitly and explicitly intertextual and hence transnational in and of itself. This cultural renegotiation can be regarded as a transcultural benefit, whereby the circular flow enhances the product. Originally conceived of as a series about a retired male police officer, the scriptwriters then realised that a female detective “opens a whole universe of possibilities” with multiple storylines (“La NBC”). They modelled Laura on Lynette Scavo of *Desperate Housewives* as a representation of a mother of twins who juggles her career and motherhood with varying degrees of success. The scriptwriters’ prime intention was to mirror the difficulties of working mothers, which suggests that the target audience is female.

Assistant director of TVE, Javier Pascual, explained that the creative journey was a Spanish-American synergy:

A [Spanish] series that is influenced by the American classics has a lot of merit, it is a source of pride, a great joy that it has travelled to the USA. Entering the American market is quite an achievement, particularly since it’s going to be on primetime TV on one of the main broadcasters of the country. It is the first time that NBC has adapted a Spanish series. (“La NBC”)³

The scriptwriters, Carlos Vila and Javier Holgado, attributed their success to Laura’s character as well as the calibre of the actors:

We have been able to generate interest in Spain and the US with the kind of series that they [the US] already have over there. There must be something special for them to like it. [We think] it’s Laura’s character, and the performance of the actors [...] Laura is the key figure, that’s why the Americans wanted to adapt the series. But the audience is different, [the show] will need to be more sophisticated. Even the surname is different, Laura Diamond instead of Laura Lebel. They prefer more action, so they’ve rewritten the character in order to adapt her. Interestingly, Laura Lebel is slightly different, but at the same time she remains the same character [...] The Americans have a bigger budget, of course [...], while we wanted to avoid all the modern technology. (“La NBC” n.pag.)

It should be noted that some variations of representation in the remake are due to pragmatic changes. The text was transferred into another culture with different industry conditions. The introduction of new characters or different renditions of the same character to make use of the acting talents are common features of transculturality (Proctor 8). For example, Debra Messing is well-known for her role in the sitcom *Will and Grace*, in which she plays a neurotic interior designer who shares a flat with Will after her marriage breaks down. This might explain why the American Laura is scripted as more neurotic—a role that Messing had perfected as Grace. Both series boast a star cast. Celebrated actors in the Spanish production include María Pujalte, Beatriz Carbajal, Fernando Guillén Cuervo, Oriol Tarrasón, Laura Pamplona, and César Camino as

³ Translations from Spanish are mine. See also Goyo Quintana, general director of the production company Boomerang TV, who declared his pride to have “achieved a historic milestone for our fiction” (“La NBC” n.pag.).

regulars. As is so often the case in murder mysteries, renowned actors give guest performances in popular series, enhancing both the popularity of the series and their own visibility. These include Lydia Bosch, Carlos Hipólito, Arantxa Aranguren, Joan Cosas, Javier Collado, and Marta Rivera Larralde. In the US series, the regular cast includes Debra Messing, Josh Lucas, Laz Alonso, Janina Gavankar, Max Jenkins, Marc Webster, Callie Thorne, and Meg Stedle. Guest stars include Eric McCormack, Stockard Channing, Kelly Rutherford, Wallace Shawn, and Willie Garson, to name but a few.

WOMEN AND HUMOUR

I now turn to the use of humour. Debates about women and humour date back to the nineteenth century (Wagner 35), when women were slowly becoming more active participants in public debates. The then nascent international feminism was portraying women as morally superior, a benefit to society, and thus to be taken seriously (Evans). In contrast, the “angel of the house” discourse—part of the conservative backlash—saw women’s role as homemakers, limiting their influence to the private sphere. Constructed as inferior and perceived as lacking intelligence, it was hard to imagine a woman capable of having a sense of humour: “proper ladies couldn’t and shouldn’t be funny” (Wagner 45). Although by the early twentieth century women were performing in slapstick comedies, the vital question remained: can women be active producers of humour instead of being the passive butts of jokes? The former requires a readiness to perform and act in a ridiculous manner. More importantly, can humour be used strategically to bring about social change? Comedy scholars are divided regarding comedy’s subversive or conservative potential. Some scholars consider it an ideal format for a feminist subject position, since “narrative and generic qualities both introduce and then contain subversive content” (Lotz 111; see also Rabinovitz, Swink). Boyle leaves us in no doubt that comedy is the ideal genre for feminism, since it disguises misbehaviour: the “female-authored comic performance is overwhelming[ly] concerned with transgression for social change” (85). Comedy is a forum in which complex concepts can be articulated precisely because the stakes are so low (Jenkins). Popular culture in general, and women’s comedy in particular, gives women a safe space to talk back. Comedy is thus a liminal space in which social change can be imagined, playing with the expectations of the audience. But who or what are we actually laughing at? In a TV show both diegetic and non-diegetic humour have to be considered: when and why are the characters making fun of themselves, each other, or the situation within the narrative frame; when and why is the viewer laughing at the characters while *they* are oblivious to the humorous situation? The standard typology classifies humour into three main categories: relief, superiority, and incongruity. The function of relief humour is to release nervous energy, often used to overcome sociocultural inhibitions and/or to reduce tension in social encounters. Superiority humour is used to assert authority between superior and inferior individuals or social groups, while incongruity humour exploits unusual associations, through violations of social and cultural norms (Berger; Meyer). Moniek Buijzen and Patti M. Valkenburg expand this typology to seven main categories (slapstick, clownish humour, conceptual surprise, misunderstanding, irony, satire, and parody) (Buijzen and Valkenburg 150), a categorisation which lends itself to an analysis of both versions of *The Mysteries of Laura*. It should be noted that many instances of humour can be explained by more than one theory. For example, slapstick based on coincidence generates incongruity; yet slapstick can also generate a malicious delight and therefore result in superiority, while the aggressive element produces relief.

Crime comedy seems a contradiction in terms, but studies on emergency workers have shown that humour is prevalent in these professions (Vivona). Humour as a coping mechanism in psychologically distressing situations negotiates the emotional burden and mitigates stress through reframing.⁴ It is not only the horrific sights of the crime scene that need reframing, but also the emotional strain of socially important work: the pursuit of justice (Vivona 137–42). In the viewer’s imagination, scenes in dark crime dramas are the gruesome reality. Yet considering the sociological evidence of police work, the representation of crime in *Los misterios* and *The Mysteries* is perhaps more realistic: a nonchalant walk through the crime scene, a first stab at theories, close-ups of vital clues, and the murder mystery commences. Furthermore, occupational humour as a cultural bond in an organisation based on masculine

⁴ Vorhaus (19) points out that the semantic concept of frame-shifting is a source of humour.

hegemony shows a variety of humour types and practices. There is a fine line between light-hearted, innocent banter and humorous abuse around gender discrimination (Charman). As we will see below, the cultural identities of different subgroups and power imbalances are often negotiated through humour, simply because couching criticism in humorous language makes the potential fallout easier to negotiate.⁵

FEMALE DETECTIVES

The female amateur sleuth has been a popular representation of intelligent women ever since Miss Marple. Today the emphasis of such representations is on the professionalisation of women in a male-dominated organisation, thereby raising their profile and social importance. In the case of *Los misterios*, the result is so convincing and true to reality that the scriptwriters received fan post stating that it is an accurate portrayal of what women officers face in their professional lives: “Having both a gun and a dummy in the handbag is true to life” (“La NBC” n.pag.). They also received official commendations from the Spanish Ministry of the Interior for the positive image of the police, in the sense that they are portrayed as likeable characters and in stark contrast to the police state that several Spanish generations grew up in prior to 1975 (when Spain started transitioning from a dictatorship to a democracy).

While in general terms police work is one of the most represented occupations on television, Spanish female police officers are conspicuous by their absence. This is partly due to social reality. It was not until 1971 that the first woman entered the Spanish police force, mainly because a woman’s place was deemed to be in the home during Franco’s dictatorship,⁶ and even in 2010 only approximately 12 per cent of officers were women. While Laura Lebré is only the second female protagonist as a senior police officer on Spanish TV,⁷ Laura Diamond is part of a more extensive fictional body of female police officers in popular US culture. Surprisingly, in 1972 even in the US only 1 per cent of police officers were female (Mizejewski 18), increasing to 12 per cent in 2012 (“Share” n.pag.). Spain and the US are thus on a par when it comes to social reality, whereas the representations in televisual cultures diverge considerably. This suggests that US media culture creates role models for female professionals in general (not only police officers), by using the popular genre of crime dramas to reach a mass audience. They are thus models of women in a position of (legal) public power. While the positive representations of female televisual crime fighters act as a potential catalyst of social change challenging the status quo in the US, in Spain crime dramas are reflective of social reality, since even successful police shows of the 1990s and 2000s, such as *Policías* and *El comisario*, fail the “representation-of-women-officers” test.

One of the starkest contrasts is the format adopted by the scriptwriters: while Holgado and Vila opted for the cosy-detective format in order not to produce an action-packed series, the American scriptwriters deliberately used the common format of US cop shows (Holgado and Vila). Laura Lebré reminds us of Miss Marple or Jessica Fletcher as the archetypal cosy detective and conventional elements of sitcom enhance this cosiness. Potentially perilous circumstances are often resolved through humour. What is more, in every episode the mystery plots are juxtaposed with unthreatening subplots of family drama. Laura Lebré’s absent-minded personality—as evidenced by her chaotic private life—makes her seem not intelligent enough to solve crimes. Equally, due to her good nature, she seems too gullible to ever suspect or catch a murderer. Yet, despite her inimitable scatterbrained style, Laura solves each mystery with Marple-style attention to detail (seemingly irrelevant marks on the carpet, a loose button, a cigar in the ashtray). She uses intuition combined with detailed detection while discarding forensic science. To reinforce her investigative style, and lower her credibility even further, she regularly states: “I need sugar to think properly”, thus undermining her own authority. In an episode set in a convent (S2E15), a monk exclaims in pride and admiration, “True detectives like us don’t need proof”—comparing religious beliefs to a detective’s intuition and himself to Laura, in a gentle parody of the genre.

⁵ Lynch observes that “humour is used to create differentiation between different professions in the same organisation to mask the sting of authoritative-based demands” (462).

⁶ This compares to 1905 in Germany and 1911 in the UK.

⁷ *Petra Delicado* (1999) was the first TV series with a female superintendent. The series was based on the novels of Alicia Giménez Bartlett, one of Spain’s most popular crime writers.

The Mysteries of Laura is much more formulaic than the Spanish original, in line with the conventions of US crime drama. Laura Diamond is reminiscent of Cagney and Lacey in the crime-fighting action-packed plots. Stock scenes include Billy, her sidekick, chasing suspects through the streets of Manhattan, followed by a couple of scenes in the interview room, the raid of a suspect's location, a few suspects who turn out to be innocent, a showdown with the murderer, and a final scene in the local bar or at Laura's house. Both series include locations that lend themselves to the use of relief and incongruity humour. Laura Diamond searches for suspects in spas, sorority clubs, sex shops, sex addict group therapy, gay parties, fashion houses, or drag bars—an even balance between the mainstream middle class and marginalised groups. Laura Lebel's investigations take her to dog training schools, bouldering training grounds, men's locker rooms, inside saunas, cooking lessons, a boarding school, the secret service, spa hotels, a convent which, to make matters more incongruous, observes a strict vow of silence, and, in true Agatha-Christie style, deserted country houses. Overall, *Los misterios* is thus much more mainstream and whiter than the US series. It is important to note that although the backdrops make Diamond feel uncomfortable during the evidence-gathering phase, she is still very much in charge, happy to whip a suspect in a sex shop, if the situation requires it. The humour here stems from the incongruity of the “enhanced interviewing technique” of physical punishment in a setting evocative of sexual pleasure. For Laura Lebel, on the contrary, the same bizarre assortment of locations serves to make her look incompetent; the creation of relief humour causes hysterical laughter. Hence the same type of absurd locations is used differently: either to confirm Diamond's self-confident professional persona or to highlight Lebel's slapstick performance of apparent incompetence. [Mesropova \(280\)](#) reminds us that the female sleuth often finds herself unexpectedly amid criminal activity, virtually stumbling into it. Lebel's clumsiness and her visually humorous body language add slapstick humour. She seems to bumble through most scenes, regularly stumbling over flowerpots and other such items, sometimes to the extreme of contaminating the crime scene. Where Laura Lebel wanders around looking ineffective, Laura Diamond self-confidently and assertively walks towards suspects and confronts them.

Self-deprecation has been described as “humour as hopelessness”, while feminist humour ought to be a “humour of hope” in order to galvanise social change ([Franzini 812](#)). Admittedly, self-deprecation might dangerously play into the stereotype of incompetent women. Laura Lebel might be perceived as weak and amateurish when dealing with suspects. However, humour, as a sense-making activity, is based on identity and personal beliefs, Laura's self-deprecation is an integral part of her personality. Her humour is also a powerful strategy based on self-confidence which endears her to the viewer and outwits the suspects, since it lures them into a false sense of security. The ditsy-woman act is an excellent disguise for investigating officers, as it allows incisive detection skills to run rings around the startled suspects when needed. More generally, it also allows for a more flexible subject position: she combines femininity and feminism, toughness and softness, career and family. She demonstrates her astuteness and determination; her toughness is cerebral, not physical.

In contrast, Laura Diamond is openly self-confident:

Jake: The rich and powerful have to be handled differently or they walk. Kennedy never did time for Chappaquiddick, O. J. Simpson went to prison for burglary [not murder].

Laura: I didn't work on those cases.

Laura speaks in a confident voice with a hint of irony to reassure us that she appreciates the complexity of law enforcement. Arguably, self-confidence is represented in culturally different ways—American overt self-assurance as opposed to Spanish quiet self-reliance—and as such both women fit into their different cultural contexts, both real and fictional.

In incongruity humour the emphasis is on cognition: we must understand what is socially and culturally normal to notice a difference. Galán Fajardo, in her study on gender in Spanish workplace dramas, demonstrates that “normal” representations of female professionals usually include their marital status as a topic of the narrative, with divorce, single motherhood, and male betrayal being the top three issues. In police dramas, most female officers are physically attractive, strong, and eager to prove their worth; they deny their sensitivity or any other stereotypically feminine traits ([Galán Fajardo 231–233](#); see also [Lacalle and Gómez 59–](#)

67). The private (and sometimes professional) narratives throughout the show do indeed deal with divorce, single motherhood, and male betrayal. However, Laura Lebel is not particularly attractive, her casual clothes make her look scruffy. Nor is she suppressing her femininity. Her intuition is her X-factor, while her ethic of care (Gilligan) towards everybody she deals with (colleagues, suspects, family) is striking.

The Mysteries' take on femininity is ambivalent; the official American promotional video's soundtrack is "She's a Lady" by Tom Jones: "She's got style, she's got grace, she's a winner".⁸ This seems an odd choice of song, as neither style nor grace is part of Laura Diamond's winning formula. Tom Jones also tells us that the "little lady [...] knows just what to do, and how to please me". The comic gap between the visual clues of a hard-boiled cop and the lyrics about a lady who pleases her man results in our laughter. Equally, when in episode 6 (S1E6) Laura has to go undercover at a black-tie fashion show, she is visibly uncomfortable in a long dress and the viewer enjoys this moment of incongruity, presenting a woman who is not in touch with her feminine side.

True to the formulaic culture of detective series, recurring motifs abound, and moments of embarrassment and comic relief are produced by Laura Lebel's inimitable behaviour: at an auction she accidentally buys a painting for €120,000; when trying to arrest somebody, she accidentally shows photos of her children instead of her police badge; she has a telephone conversation with her mother while interrogating a suspect, prompting disbelief and consternation; she follows a suspect on a bouldering wall in order to interview him while hanging from the wall; in the few chase scenes she pursues suspects on mopeds or airport buggies rather than a car. Her scatterbrained nature is also emphasised through clichéd scenes concerning women's large handbags: when she looks for some important information in her bag, she has to unpack its entire contents (including her police badge and gun), before eventually finding the small piece of crumpled paper she was looking for. While there is much less of this slapstick humour in *The Mysteries*, some tropes are retained. Laura Diamond's handbag features in the opening credits and she happily admits "My handbag doubles as a trash can" but then extracts a vital piece of evidence she picked up at the crime scene. Viewers might ask themselves whether such evidence should have been casually put into her handbag, subtly alerting us to her lack of professionalism and unconventional methods. Scenes like these might temporarily undermine women's professional image.

However, both Lauras' outstanding abilities as police inspectors can be read on a symbolic level as a manifestation of professional technical skills (the ability to solve murders). Both Lauras are by far the best police officers in their teams. Interestingly, as Gamman reminds us, in questions of justice and ethics, women disrupt the mechanisms of signification associated with the genre (Gamman 13). Both Lauras' core values of empathy, compassion, and an ethic of care (Gilligan) clash with the male law-and-order approach. Laura Lebel's detective skills rest entirely on female intuition and empathy with the victim, sometimes even with suspects and murderers. She looks for a humane way of explaining motives. Although Laura Diamond also relies on her intuition, her performance is more like a hard-boiled cop. In the opening scene of the pilot episode she is introduced to us in a car chase against the New York skyline. Her driving skills are proficient enough to chase a criminal through backstreets, and once they are in a stand-off, she cautions him to give himself up. When he takes a hostage, she expertly shoots off his earlobe and quickly arrests him, commenting, "They never believe me", in the sense that they underestimate a female police officer. The scene is set for the American Laura as a representation of female strength that disavows femininity by adopting a masculinised characterisation. This suggests diametrically opposed representations of female police officers. Laura Lebel excels through femininity: as a quietly self-confident professional, her ultimate strength is to show weakness in public.

Both women see things others do not; their crime-solving skills are far superior to other officers. Laura Lebel's sixth sense is that of a sniffer dog;⁹ after the usual parade of witnesses and

⁸ Paul Anka originally wrote the song and released it in 1970. Tom Jones's cover version was more popular in the US.

⁹ In Spanish, *lebel* means "hound". In a flashback (S3E2) her father, who was also a police officer, compliments her on her "smell" as a synecdoche for her excellent detective skills. One might surmise that Laura's career choice was based on her father's wishes. This would explain her uneasy relationship with the more distressing aspects of policing.

suspects, the viewer feels lost among the evidence and counterevidence. This seemingly unsolvable puzzle depends less on the viewer's ability, but gives us just enough participation to enable us to appreciate the detective's intellectual abilities. In contrast, Laura Diamond's skill is to look at complex evidence and interpret it in a way that does not occur to anybody else (a wheezing voice on a voice message, pop songs, video evidence that Laura examines by the square millimetre to spot miniscule clues). She is quicker than anybody else at deciphering clues, motives, and people, although colleagues and viewers alike find her leaps wildly speculative. As a result, she often presents the evidence to the killer and gets them to confess in a private conversation, while Laura Lebel rounds up all the suspects and explains the crime to everybody. Similar to other classic murder mystery shows (*Miss Marple*; *Murder, She Wrote*; *Death in Paradise*), Laura reveals at length (around ten minutes of screen time) why and how the crime was committed. The suspense during the revelations is intense and makes the viewer appreciate Laura's intelligence and professionalism. Reference to their professional prominence is such a frequent occurrence that this recognition rubs off on us through character engagement. Their star positions within the team also allow them to bend rules and regulations. Laura Lebel's rule-bending is usually done to help the detection of the crime, while Laura Diamond happily abuses her position of police power for private issues: she uses police databases to check out her nannies and rationalises this as genuine motherly concern ("trust is a multifaceted concept for a mother"). She asks her assistant Max to check out schools for her twins and bribe teachers with promises of cancelling parking tickets. With her superiors, this lands her the label of "rogue detective".

The different sociocultural contexts influence how the series present and shape their leading ladies. In the fictional world of Spanish crime series, Laura Lebel is the first detective for whom family commitments can go hand in hand with professional success. Her fictional predecessor, Petra Delicado, represented the first generation of senior police officers who had to choose between profession and family. As such, Laura can be read as a positive televisual role model for today's young professional women, who can enjoy Spain's progress but no longer need to pit femininity against feminism. The context of US television drama is decidedly different. Laura Diamond has many female forebearers in popular culture and thus does not need to be positioned as a role model—or, more precisely, she is a different role model. American Laura is much tougher as a cop. She shoots criminals in the leg to stop them from running ("I've got my eyes on him, I'll take him down") or punches them in the face when they resist arrest. Shelley Godsland notes, in relation to Petra Delicado, that the hard-boiled female officer's use of strong language, her violence, and the phallicisation of her gun masculinise her identity (*Godsland 56*). While Laura Diamond is an excellent markswoman, Laura Lebel handles her gun like a novice, reducing it to a random item in her handbag rather than a weapon (that is, if she can actually find the gun when she needs it). A large part of the humour stems from her looking useless. Lebel's cosy detective type tones down her professional success. Female modesty is still part of this cautious venture into the new world of representing highly able women. Diamond, on the other hand, does not need to step carefully, both televisual culture and social reality in the US allow her to be an openly self-confident professional.

OFFICE POLITICS: PARTNERS AND TEAMS

I will now turn to the representation of office politics in order to explore how these female protagonists operate in their teams. The blurring between public and private spheres is personified by the characters of ex-husbands, who are also their superiors. As senior police officers in the position of male social power and upholders of justice, they are perfect examples of the male ego in collapse. Laura Lebel's residual hurt about Chief Inspector Jacobo Salgado's (Fernando Guillén Cuervo) infidelity (with colleague Lydia) colours their working relationship. To make matters worse, he does not miss a single opportunity to remind Laura that she cannot cope with her *doble jornada* [double duty], making the children the classic hostages in their divorce dispute. Satisfyingly for the female viewer, he loses those battles regularly. Josh Lucas, who plays Laura Diamond's husband Jake Broderick, explained in an interview that the representation of divorce culture was one of the main attractions for the producers to buy the rights for the Spanish series. Many scenes are dedicated, with humour, to the divorced couple Laura and Jake. They share parenting responsibilities: he has fun with the boys for an

hour; she does all the hard work. He buys them slingshots; Laura then has to calm down the neighbour when they break his window. When in the second season, Laura and Jake try to inspect a potential crime scene, they discuss their parental job sharing. While Laura is doing the hard, physical work of breaking into a warehouse, Jake leans over her and complains about a seemingly sexist distribution of tasks:

Jake: Isn't it a bit anti-feminist to farm the math homework out to the man?

Laura: I'm pretty sure the boys know who wears the pants.

Laura cracks the lock of the warehouse and enters.

Jake: Do you want to give me some small sense of what we're searching for or not?

His casual reference back to the job at hand is almost an aside, while he is still moaning about the unfairness of the private situation. Catching criminals is not as important as the private battle for justice. He wallows in self-pity, portraying himself as an innocent victim of a hostile feminist world. When Laura suggests that he should look after the children on Wednesdays while she stays in a hotel to have a break, Jake exclaims in disbelief: "You want to have a holiday every week?" Laura: "Yes, Jake, you have a holiday from the children the other six days". Jacobo is more of a hands-on father and, as a man-child, he is sweet in private contexts and charmingly ineffective as a boss. Where Jacobo is genuinely concerned about his family's well-being, Jake is purposefully driving Laura mad to make her see that she needs a man. Where Jacobo is laughably mediocre, Jake is annoyingly arrogant. These male behaviours are a reaction to their ex-wives' different demeanours. Diamond's self-confidence is met with arrogance, while Lebre's quiet and self-conscious approach never requires Jacobo to rise to any challenge. Instead he happily cashes in on his ex-wife's success. This goes against cultural stereotypes: we would expect Jacobo to be the *machista* and an American to be more egalitarian, on the assumption that the US has progressed further on gender issues.

One of the main deviations from the classic mystery formula is the choice of a female inspector: the female detectives are intellectually superior, while their male assistants adopt the role of an inferior subordinate. Both partners share their incredulity and frustration when the Lauras rely on sheer gut feeling, which belies forensic evidence. Martín Maresca (Oriol Tarrasón), loveable rogue and Latin lover, sleeps with friends, colleagues, and suspects, playfully blurring the lines between duty and pleasure. He nevertheless cares deeply about Laura and might even be in love with her. Sexual tension between the two is a recurring theme adding a mystery element to this professional and personal friendship. The American sidekick Billy Soto (Laz Alonso), while cute and handsome, never oversteps boundaries, suggesting more professional ethics. There is camaraderie between the two in dangerous situations. When a murderer resists arrest and Billy shoots him in the arm, Laura remarks, "You had to steal my thunder", to which he replies: "You shoot the next one". This black humour here serves to express a professional bond.

Interestingly, all four men use resistance humour as an alternative discourse (Martin), playfully resisting the sophisticated feminine detection skills by creating a humorous interpretative space between resenting and admiring the superior mind of the female detective. Sometimes masculinity might also be reduced to caricature when subtle jokes are aimed at the mock-machos Martín, Jacobo, and Cuevas: a mock-jock womaniser, a police chief who would prefer to be a stay-at-home father, and the stupid rookie who comes up with wildly implausible murder theories, thus parodying the genre itself. As Hanke rightly points out, in mock-macho TV shows, "this discursive strategy updates masculinity by putting the signs of masculinity into a co-motion with the shifting horizon of our expectations" (90). Both series "facilitate a dominant female gaze and a route whereby feminist meanings can be introduced" (Gamman 12). Mockery lovingly disturbs the macho world view; it does not need to be dominant. When Jake tries to be "down with the kids" at a basketball game, not only does he miss the basket, but his colleague Meredith then easily lands it. Worse still, when returning to the precinct, both Laura and Meredith outperform Jake in maths. Being outperformed is a daily occurrence for the police captain. Although Jake deals well with his hurt male ego, he resorts to superior humour. When Laura seems to trust her gut instinct too much, he tells her off by sarcastically stating: "I'm hung up on this little thing called evidence" (S1E3). When Jake celebrates his detection skills ("It feels so good to be right"), Laura gives as good as she gets: "I know, that's how I feel all the time" (S2E10). However, occasionally he wins the verbal duels:

Jake: A threesome works for some people.

Laura: Some people called Jake?

Jake: Right now, you're the one with two guys.

The Lauras' nemeses are Lydia and Meredith. Lydia, in *Los misterios*, is the exact opposite of Laura. With her scientific mind, she champions forensic evidence above all else and looks down on Laura's seemingly haphazard method of intuitive detection. She frequently uses superiority humour, trying to make Laura feel inferior. Lydia regularly asserts her superiority through seemingly professional behaviour (instead of bumbling around). She is usually working on a different case, resulting in an unspoken race to be the first to solve their respective cases, a competition Lydia frequently loses. Yet she stubbornly refuses to change, unwilling to accept that a bit of gut feeling might go a long way when solving crimes. Her feeling of superiority is such that she uses jocular abuse humour on everybody, pointing out flaws in others with indecent regularity. However, on a non-diegetic level, viewers might read her superiority as insecurity and/or self-centredness, and so we laugh at Lydia's expense.

While in *The Mysteries* the relationship between Laura and Meredith starts on similarly hostile terms, Meredith is also presented as a more complex character than Lydia. Early in the first season she opens up to Billy: "Do you have any idea how difficult it is to be taken seriously as a female detective?", which comes as a surprise to him, since he only sees unapologetic self-confidence in Laura ("I'm a bad-ass goddess detective"). Meredith's voice is used to represent a more insecure female officer who has to work harder at success than Laura. In contrast to Lydia, she is more open about it, perceived as less insecure by the viewer and thus endears herself to us. The relationship then evolves, particularly in season 2, when both women are depicted with more feminine traits. Markers of feminism and femininity then go hand in hand: while Laura is still the supreme female detective, Meredith's contribution is in the traditionally male domain of technology. Both women also bond around fashion items. Long gone are the 1960s and 1970s, when sexy clothes seemed an essential part of a female detective's armour (*Charlie's Angels*, *The Avengers*). Here, it is a means of female bonding rather than the objectification of women. Laura and Meredith become increasingly close through discussing their love lives (Laura being torn between a boyfriend and Jake, Meredith starting a relationship with Billy), leading to a relationship that is less polarised than Laura and Lydia's in *Los misterios*. And, thus, the series fails the Bechdel Test¹⁰ due to the subject matter of their conversations. Girls' talk becomes increasingly frequent. Even their new boss, Captain Nancy Santiani, joins in when she tells Laura: "You have a soft spot for men who never grow up and that's how [the murderer] pulled you in". In season 2, when Meredith and Billy are partners as well as lovers, Meredith adamantly protects her equality, and gets angry when Billy tries to look after her in the field. She makes sure to protect her tough image by putting herself—to Billy's chagrin—in dangerous positions during shoot-outs, or by racing a suspect in a breathtaking motorbike chase. As a woman in a male-dominated profession, Meredith equates ability to masculinity, which indicates the encoding of sexism on a more subtle level, namely through overzealous professional performance to prove female competence (Gamman 11). The same is true for Lydia, in *Los misterios*, and her obsession with forensic evidence. While stereotypically the viewer might assume that police work cultures are more progressive in the US, these particular fictional examples suggest that equality issues are still unresolved in America.

Laura Lebel presents herself as a mediocre professional and ditsy woman in order not to make her colleagues feel inadequate in her company. Her femininity manifests itself through her warm-heartedness and genuine care for colleagues and family members. She is motherly and has a non-confrontational communication style, as she listens sympathetically to victims, suspects, colleagues, and relatives. Diane Martin, in a study on female middle managers, observes that women often negotiate an unfamiliar culture, where violation of prescribed gender role norms creates a paradox: the tension between their positional power and their powerlessness due to societal assumptions and informal organisational dynamics. Relational solidarity is important to the female leader and humour is used as "relational repair

¹⁰ The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the Bechdel Test as a "set of criteria used as a test to evaluate a work of fiction" on the basis of its representation of female characters: (1) that at least two women are featured, (2) that these women talk to each other, and (3) that they discuss something other than a man. Also known as the Bechdel-Wallace test, it is named after the American cartoonist Alison Bechdel and her friend Liz Wallace, whom the cartoonist credits with the creation of the test.

discourse”, balancing her rational reflections with being amenable (Martin 156). The two series are particularly interesting case studies, since they confirm the specific difficulties in male-oriented organisational cultures such as the police. Martin’s study proves that relief humour is particularly prevalent in the gender/status paradox. Laura Diamond’s self-deprecating humour works slightly differently, it is more of a coping mechanism for herself. She self-confidently talks about her abilities and successes; she leaves no doubt about her exceptional talent as a cop and her colleagues are in awe of her. She has no particular desire to feign mediocrity to make people around her feel at ease—an approach to female leadership that is not needed in the US, since audiences are more used to self-confident female leaders. Nonetheless, she does look after her team and defends them against critics. “Women deconstruct both intuitive and rational responses to blame, acceptance or rejection and promote a third option: something that benefits the group as a whole” (Martin 159). When internal affairs inspect the precinct and conclude that “This precinct is like a family [...] It breaks every code in the book”, nobody seems particularly surprised or worried. By season 2 (S2E8) this family feel has become something positive. When Laura tries to defend Billy and Meredith’s love affair, she explains to Captain Santiani: “We watch out for each other. You might say we’re a family, warts and all”. Women tend to situate themselves in the organisational structure by privileging relational solidarity with their colleagues over their superiors. The distancing mechanism can be interpreted as a resistance to managerial control. It is telling that Laura Diamond reserves superiority humour, in the form of sarcasm, for her superiors (Jake and Santiani, in seasons 1 and 2, respectively). Diamond has the fortitude to speak truth to power, albeit couched in humour, while Lebel uses this technique only in a private context: when criticising Jacobo for his attitude to their children and when reminding him that the marriage broke down due to his infidelity. This suggests that overt female professional self-confidence might still be too daring for a Spanish audience.

It is noteworthy that teamwork is dissimilar in its cultural representations. The New York City homicide team is diverse, multi-skilled, and its members complement each other well, as they work on the same cases. Meredith, who is Asian-American, is the technical guru. Billy’s expertise is twofold: he is the main action man who chases suspects on the streets of Manhattan, and, as a second-generation Cuban, he is also a natural linguist who interrogates Latino villains. Max’s extensive knowledge ranges from Italian Renaissance art to the different brands of ice popsicle, not to mention his *legerdemain* with Google and police database research. As the equivalent of the Cuevas character (the fool), Max, who is openly gay, negotiates his position differently. Humour is created by his camp performance and neurotic attention to detail, such as making the entire precinct Feng Shui-compliant. Unlike Cuevas, he does not come up with wildly unreliable theories, but shines through his seemingly incongruent knowledge, which turns out to be relevant to the interpretation of evidence. Every little clue helps and the team effort is then crowned by Laura’s ability to see what others cannot, to find meaning in the smallest of clues and come up with a theory (the who, the how, the why). Although Laura Diamond is the star, success is very much a result of team effort. *The Mysteries* allows the viewer to become part of the ongoing investigation, precisely because the team constantly compare notes about the case. This relieves the intellectual burden on the viewer of solving the puzzle and increases the entertainment value. In stark contrast, Laura Lebel seems the only person capable of solving crimes, another detail that suggests the Spanish scriptwriters wanted to emphasise her unique status. In Spanish televisual culture it is still important to put successful female role models into sharp focus.

WORKING MOTHERS AND DIVORCE

The transnational intertextual circle commences with Lynette Scavo (Felicity Huffman) in *Desperate Housewives*, who was the model for Laura Lebel. While Scavo, a mother of twins (and four children in total), also struggles with juggling motherhood and a successful career in the advertisement industry, she has a husband, and therefore the issues of discontent are centred on the gender tension around household and child-rearing duties. In contrast, both Lauras are separated and therefore almost single parents. In the Spanish series, screen time is dedicated equally to both the private and professional spheres, reflecting Laura’s emotional ambiguity and thus flagging this as an ongoing issue in Spanish society. In *The Mysteries* there is much less screen time given to the private sphere, but Laura Diamond frequently relates a

professional situation to her twins while at work—making them present in spirit. She often complains about the burden of parenting in a humorous way. This incongruous humour (comparing the “terrorist twins” with real criminals) can be read as a sign of resilience as well as a sign of women doing two jobs without fully satisfying the exigencies of either. The link between private and professional spheres still exists, but the emphasis (as a function of screen time) is on the professional. The plots of police drama and melodrama converge, representing crime and divorce as a breakdown of the social order.

Laura Lebel’s failure to cope with the double duty of two jobs is a recurring theme, as is Jacobo’s portrayal of her as a bad mother. He weaponises the children and claims they would be emotionally more stable with him, a bizarre suggestion given that the relationship broke down due to his infidelity, which attests to his total lack of self-awareness or remorse. He even uses visual evidence (a drawing of Laura and the twins without him) to show how little time he is allowed to spend with his children—a surprisingly irrational proof and thus ridiculing the inspector’s reasoning skills. While rationally she sees through his game-playing, emotionally the mud sticks. She feels constantly guilty of deserting her children—a feeling not shared by Diamond. The bad mother stigma reaches extreme proportions when in episode 19 (S2E19) Laura Lebel narrowly escapes getting shot and thus questions her right to be a police officer, knowing that her children could lose their mother. In the following episode she resigns and becomes a detective for an insurance firm, only to return to her beloved police force by the end of the episode—a short-lived experiment to lower professional risk levels. This is portrayed as an internal struggle of the two competing desires to be a good mother and successful inspector. What lures her back into her police family is both the team’s incompetence to solve crimes and her motherly feelings towards them. Conversely, Laura Diamond is taken hostage in her own house, which endangers not only her own life but also those of her twins. After she is rescued by Jake and Billy, she thumps the murderer and exclaims: “I’m a mother, you son of a bitch. How dare you bring a bomb into my house?” While motherhood is foregrounded in this episode, no consideration is given to leaving her job. Lebel is the more rounded, feminine, and likeable character, while Diamond’s self-image marks her as a hard-boiled cop. Lebel’s professional self-identity is less stable than Diamond’s, indicating different stages of female professional development and self-image on either side of the Atlantic.

Both Lauras can be read metonymically as an example of professional women with children. *The Mysteries* is less of a family drama; the vicissitudes of divorce culture are foregrounded instead.¹¹ The twins become less of a storyline once all the comic relief of child-rearing scenes has been exploited; to Laura Diamond, motherhood seems a bit of a nuisance, something that keeps her from doing her job properly (“I tried to be organised once, then I had twins”). Her skills as a police officer are far superior, she is the best in her team, while as a mother she needs constant support from the babysitter. A staple of the cross-cutting between the professional and private sees Laura Diamond—star inspector and heroine of murder mysteries—go from hero to zero as soon as we are transported into her messy life of failing mother. She regularly burns dinner, forgets to go shopping or attend special events at her twins’ school. The constant contrast between Laura being a brilliant inspector and a stressed mother makes her character more human and relatable. There is much less slapstick in the American version; one of the staple comedy techniques is conceptual surprise, often used when the boundary between private and professional is blurred. The camera technique used in these scenes is a shot/reverse shot sequence: Laura is called to a crime scene in a school; as she enters the room, we see a blood-stained wall and Laura’s shocked face, as she exclaims, “This is such a depraved, unspeakable act. Get ready to be inside for a very long time”. The camera pans back to show the twins covered in red paint, saying: “Sorry mum”. She regularly uses police vocabulary in referring to her sons and makes no secret of the fact that crime fighting is easier than controlling them: “I need to find a preschool for two criminals” (pilot episode) or “put down your weapon and put your hands where I can see them” (S1E3)). The camera pans around and we realise she is talking to the twins. This conceptual surprise creates humour. At the twins’ school the helicopter mothers are so critical of Laura’s parenting skills that they give her a book entitled *Don’t Fail at Parenting*. This quickly cross-cuts to Billy interviewing a witness about a colleague nicknamed

¹¹ The notable exception is Season 2, episode 15, which revolves almost entirely around Laura’s sister and father and therefore has a Spanish feel to it.

“Crazy Daisy”, only to cross-cut back to the scene in the school, creating the trope of “crazy women”. Laura defends bullying allegations against her twins:

Laura: Do you think I condone bullying? That’s crazy.

Helicopter Mother: They might have learnt that behaviour from you.

Laura (yells): We’re peacekeepers.

This juxtaposition of a seemingly perfect mother with bad mother Laura Diamond is only a temporary dilemma. Laura laughs last when video evidence proves the bully is, in fact, the other mother’s daughter and the twins are, for once, innocent. The obvious indictment of perfect mothers with damaged children is left to the viewer, in another cross-cut Laura is immediately back in the crime-fighting world, there is no time to dwell on motherhood, confirming once again that the professional persona is foregrounded in the US series.

In season 2 of *The Mysteries* the main emphasis of the private storylines is on Jake and Laura’s estranged relationship and the possibility of them getting back together. After being shot in the final episode of season 1, Jake takes a demotion to work in the field again, as Laura’s partner. Spending more time together fighting crime, they naturally revisit their relationship. This is mirrored by a blossoming relationship between Billy and Meredith. Here the strength and flexibility of the TV series as a cultural medium adds slow character development and is, therefore, more reflective of life. [Gamman \(11\)](#) suggests that some cop series are less about crime than about providing romantic scenarios for an allegedly antagonistic pair. Jake and Laura quarrel relentlessly while solving crimes, seamlessly going from cop talk to romcom talk, segueing from live cases to happy memories of their marriage. On both subjects Jake uses jocular abuse humour: subtle quips to get on Laura’s nerves. Worse still, towards the end of the season, romcom talk becomes entangled with office gossip, and men as much as women spread rumours with startling nonchalance. There is also an explicit competition between the ex-spouses, often in the final scenes of the episodes, when relaxing in the local bar: who is the best darts or pool player? Who can drink more tequila? Who is the better cop? In the latter category it is a given that Laura wins. In contrast, since Laura Lebel does not have a competitive nature, there are no professional duels with Jacobo or anybody else. This suggests again that US culture is more accepting of openly self-confident, competitive women.

CONCLUSION

The Spanish PhD student living in Finland did not give any substantial reasons why she considered the American version better, nor did she specify if “better” referred to quality TV, production values, storylines, entertainment value, or feminist mileage. Equally, the scriptwriters of the Spanish series assumed that the American show “will need to be more sophisticated” (“[La NBC n.pag.](#)”) without indicating what that referred to. While I have no intention of extrapolating broader claims about Spanish and US TV culture, a few observations can be established.

On first viewing, the series seem to have considerable cultural differences, mainly because of differently socialised target audiences, brought up in different TV landscapes. The producers of the adaptation took into consideration genre expectations of US crime drama, incorporating elements of traditional action-packed, fast-moving, adrenaline-fuelled shows—features that the scriptwriters of *Los misterios* decided to avoid. The latter chose the cosy detective format as a parodic homage to the genre. However, a close reading suggests that the differences do not outweigh the similarities. As discussed above, the local and the global inhabit spaces of “reciprocal intersection and interpenetration” ([Buonanno 25](#)). Some issues transcend cultural specificity. Both shows dramatise the challenges experienced by many working women who, through divorce, become single parents. Neither show centres on the conflict between career and personal life, but rather on the struggle to hold them together. The Spanish scriptwriters rightly observed: “Laura is a slightly different character [in the US show], but nevertheless she remains the same” (“[La NBC n.pag.](#)”). If the analysis of these two case studies is representative, the social reality for women in male-dominated professions could conceivably have been comparable on both sides of the Atlantic around the time the series were made. When looking at the Gender Empowerment Measure of 2009, Spain was ranked eleventh while the US was ranked eighteenth of 109 countries ([Human Development Report 186–189](#)), an indication that the index of political empowerment was roughly the same in 2009. By 2020 the gap between

them had widened considerably: Spain was ranked eighth while the US was ranked fifty-third (*Global Gender Gap Report 317–318, 353–54*),¹² indicating that the US has regressed further on gender issues.

Televsual representations of professional women in the public sphere, particularly as upholders of justice, are often the only means for viewers to learn what it is like to be a lawmaker, lawyer, or law enforcement officer. Both series here “facilitate a dominant female gaze and a route whereby feminist meanings can be introduced in order to disturb the status quo” (Gamman 12). The female gaze (of the camera, the characters, and the spectators) is a range of looks, that although “fragmented and contradictory [...] constitutes an overall female perspective” (Gamman 12). The female experience in the workplace comedies discussed above is a multiplicity of gazes. The interpretative space and the character’s ambiguities permit multiple readings, partly by using humour to bypass normative constraints. Popular feminist culture is particularly effective when feminist ideas can be tested in the fictional world of everyday lived experience, in which it not only disturbs the status quo but rewrites it. The most important incongruity is the representation of successful female police officers despite—or because of—their inappropriate and seemingly unprofessional behaviour. Comedy is a prime mechanism for representing social change that might be “too threatening when encoded as realist drama” (Wagner 36). When used effectively, humour has the potential to lead to behavioural change, be it in the form of a coping mechanism, as a release of tensions, or as a paradox negotiation technique. Comedy is the ideal genre for feminism, since it disguises misbehaviour: the “female-authored comic performance is concerned with transgression for social change” (Boyle 85).

A representation of strong women which also allows for moments of weakness is comforting for female viewers, since they do not feel inadequate in comparison to the airbrushed stereotypical career women. The protagonists are represented as exceptionally talented; the ability of female professionals is no longer in question on either side of the Atlantic. The crux is their double duty as police officers and mothers, which is negotiated very differently. Laura Diamond brings her work home in that she treats her twins like criminals; motherhood is a nuisance that needs to be dealt with daily. Conversely, Laura Lebel is a mother who brings her maternal instincts to work. Where the former is primarily a police officer (to the point of reconstructing crime scenes with her children’s toys), the latter is, first and foremost, a mother. It follows, then, that Lebel is stuck in a traditionally self-effacing role, almost too embarrassed by her constant success, suggesting that Spanish culture cannot countenance successful women yet, or if it does, it is contained in the motherly type.

Both Jacobo and Jake reject responsibility for the break-up of their marriage, representing male denial as a universal trait. However, the male gender roles also go against cultural expectations: Jacobo is the more hands-on father—rather than the stereotypical *machista*—while Jake seems to be stuck in outdated models of fatherhood. Furthermore, Jacobo is never envious of Laura’s success, whereas Jake’s competitive streak makes his constant defeats a problem for his ego. Surprisingly, *The Mysteries* ends on a dramatic cliff-hanger, when Laura informs Jake that she would like to get back together, only a few moments after he has proposed to his new girlfriend. The conservative ending of *The Mysteries* is particularly incompatible with the bad-ass cop image that Laura Diamond would like to exude. This incongruity will be frustrating to the feminist viewer; not only does *The Mysteries* fail the Bechdel Test, but it also goes back to the bad old days when women were too forgiving of male fallibility. In the end the Tom Jones song becomes pertinent. *Los misterios* is refreshingly different on this issue: with her quiet self-confidence, Laura leaves Jacobo in no doubt that the marriage is over, again going against the stereotypical grain. The questions of quality television and whether “the popular is political” (Gamman 18) are ultimately subjective. Both series ended too early, and fans complained bitterly on both sides of the Atlantic. Laura fandom was recently renewed in Spain, when she returned to the small screen in the format of a TV movie, making it the most watched programme in January 2022, ahead of the long-running and immensely popular *Cuentame/Tell me how it Happened*.

¹² The Gender Empowerment Measure tracks the following indicators: seats in parliament held by women; female legislators, senior officials, managers; female professional workers and technical workers; gender pay gap; the year women received the vote; the year the first woman became a presiding officer in parliament, or one of its houses; percentage of ministerial positions held by women.

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