

The Influence of the American Sitcom on the Production of TV Comedy in Spain

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Introduction

Recent years have been a golden age for television fiction production, in terms of both quantity and quality. *ER* (NBC, 1994-2009), *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006), *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004-) and *House* (Fox, 2004-) are only a select sample of series acclaimed as high-quality popular television entertainment. These are commercial series designed for large audiences, each inspiring its own significant fan base, which approximate the condition of cinema through the range of their production standards and the care lavished on story development (Jancovich and Lyons, 2003; McCabe and Akass, 2007). Although most of these series are produced in the United States, a number of interesting Spanish-made series have also appeared, including *Cuéntame* (TVE 1, 2001-), *Los Simuladores* (Cuatro, 2006) and *Desaparecida* (TVE 1, 2007-2008). Television fiction became the leading product in the sector over the course of the 1990s in Spain, establishing itself as the audience's favourite genre and one of the most profitable television formats (Diego and Pardo, 2008: 47).

However, these series are not the only examples of such success: *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-1998), *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004) and *Frasier* (NBC, 1993-2004) are instances from a long list of TV comedies that set new standards for the situation comedy (sitcom) at the end of the twentieth century. These programs reached their zenith during the 1990s, and their finales prompted critics to announce the death of the classic sitcom. Nevertheless, as a television format, the sitcom has proven amenable to refined adaptation in other countries besides the US; moreover, as in the case of Spain, it has reinvigorated other television production systems.

Indeed, the purpose of this article is to explore the influence of the sitcom on the production of television comedy programs in Spain in order to establish the production standards set for the sitcom in this country. The case in point is *Friends*, and the direct relationship between that series and the production of *7 Vidas* (Tele 5, 1999-2006) in Spain. *Friends* is one of the most celebrated comedies of recent years -- a critical and popular success. With ten seasons on air and numerous awards to its name, it is widely regarded as one of the greatest sitcoms in the history of television. With an on-air lifespan of seven years, *7 Vidas* became one of the longest-running programs in the history of national broadcasting in Spain. Although its audience ratings were not spectacular in its opening seasons, its following grew in line with a favourable critical response as the series progressed.

This research is a part of Television Studies, specifically within the following categories: contemporary TV industries (Caldwell, 2008; Moran and Malbon, 2006), international television flow (Waisbord, 2004; De Bens and de Smaele, 2001; Biltereyst and Meers, 2000;

Tracey and Redal, 1995), and Americanization of television production (Shahaf, 2007; Chitnis, 2006; Harrington and Bielby, 2005; Olson, 1999; McQuail, 1997; Biltereyst, 1991; Tracey, 1985). Although many of these works criticize the American-centered global media culture, our case study results will be positive. The standardization and professionalization of the creative process receives the credit for the positive influence. This article is structured as follows: first, the main features of the sitcom in the US are outlined; then, the development of the genre of television comedy in Spain is traced; finally, taking *7 Vidas* as a test case, the influence of *Friends* on the production of television comedy in Spain is analyzed.

1. The sitcom in the US

Television comedies have been a constant in fiction formats on the small screen. The comedy genre has been shaped in different ways on television in the US: sitcoms, sketch shows, stand-up broadcasts, and adult-oriented animation programs (Creeber, 2001: 13–113). However, the sitcom is the form whose pedigree has become most firmly established in terms of tradition, popular demand and weight within the industry in the US television market.

A number of commentators have pointed to the sitcom as one of the most conventional genres on US television. The format emerged in the 1950s, its origins merging with the rise of commercial television in that country; nowadays, the US is still the place where most of such production is carried out (Álvarez Berciano, 1999: 14).

Despite the predominance of American sitcoms in the field, the significance of the British production market should also be taken into account, in such noteworthy series as *Fawlty Towers* (BBC, 1975-1979), *The Good Life* (BBC, 1975-1978), *Only Fools and Horses* (BBC, 1981-2003) and *Yes Minister* (BBC, 1980-1988). In addition, as is the case in Spain, the influence of the US sitcom on local production for domestic markets should also be noted.

The following may be read as a functional definition of this television format: the sitcom is a program lasting half an hour whose characters interact in comic situations (Wolf, 1996: 3). The cornerstone of situation comedy may be identified in light of this description. Sitcoms show how fictional characters react to the situations of conflict in which they find themselves (Curtis, 1982: 10–11). The sitcom is a direct heir to both the theatre and radio serials, and relies on its very artificiality to heighten its comic effect. Indeed, a number of commentators have used the term "transparent artificiality" (Mills, 2004: 67) in relation to the canned laughter in the background, the highly theatrical *mise en scène*, and the acting styles favoured.

Since the very beginning and over the course of more than fifty years, neither the production model nor the narrative structure followed has shown any significant variation; the sitcom has become one of the most stable genres in the US television market. *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-1960), *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (CBS, 1961-1966), *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964-1972), *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-1998) and *Cheers* (NBC, 1982-1993) are representative examples of successful series, leading up to the "golden age" when *Seinfeld*, *Frasier* and *Friends* comprised "comedy night" on NBC. A number of the main characteristics of the classic sitcom are set out below (Cortés, 2000: 185–189):

- a closed episode, serialized production, with a short running-time (approximately 22 minutes per episode), designed for long-term on-air broadcast;

- the narrative usually centers on two or three characters with stereotypical and sometimes clashing personalities, set in common, everyday situations; the characters have highly defined qualities – virtues or defects that are reflected in strikingly dramatic ways;
- shooting normally takes place on a soundstage in front of a live studio audience; a single stage is normally used, divided into a fixed number of sets; and the program is shot using three or four cameras;
- the world beyond the set is very rarely seen, although it is frequently referenced in the script;
- the script is shaped by two defining features: short, lively, sharp, well-worked exchanges and visual gags.

In production terms, while the acting reflects the genre's debt to theatre, the shooting style makes the end result pure television. A typical sitcom production involves the use of several cameras -- that is, a number of cameras are rolling at the same time. Another key characteristic of the television comedy is the role of the setting -- set design, costumes and the physical movement of actors -- in the show. With regard to sitcom scriptwriting, the Aristotelian principles of drama have been adapted to the conditions of television as a medium.

Firstly, in the 1980s, further narrative layers were added in what are referred to as multi-story sitcoms, amplifying the complexity of the series' plotlines and giving the traditional situation comedy a heightened dramatic charge. As a general rule, each episode of a standard television comedy such as *Friends* contains an average of three plotlines: a main plot and up to three other sub-plots. At the same time, viewers might tune into the program at any stage and require some knowledge of past events; hence the need for what is referred to as *redundancy* or *dispersed exposition*, which normally involves a character summarizing what has taken place up to then in his or her lines (Thompson, 2003: 56).

Secondly, the structure of the sitcom clearly depends on its broadcast mode. Each episode is structured in two 12-minute segments, separated by a break for advertising. As a consequence, the script is likewise structured in two parts around the break. The action of the first segment ends on a note of suspense -- that is, there is a "cliffhanger" in the episode's plot that is not resolved until after the break for advertising (Thompson, 2003: 42), thus piquing the viewers' interest and ensuring that they stay tuned in to see how the episode ends. In addition, different seasons of the same series are often linked by "cliffhanger" endings (Thompson, 2003: 62), wherein a central plotline is left open from the last episode of one season to the first episode of the next, a common device in dramatic genres and one which inspires viewer loyalty over time. In the beginning, therefore, the sitcom was envisioned as a sequence of independent episodes. However, as the commercial television model evolved and the audience ratings battle intensified, soap opera-style plotlines -- that is, serial storylines -- were gradually introduced to consolidate a program's popular following.

Thirdly, most sitcom episodes open with a *teaser* or *hook*, a short scene designed to grab the audience's attention and ensure that they keep watching after the first commercial break. In the US, this scene usually comes before the program credits and is independent of the show's plotlines, although it is now becoming more and more common for the teaser to foreshadow one or other of the episode's main or secondary plot-lines. The episode comes to a close with what is referred to as a *tag*, which is broadcast over the program's final credits (Rannow, 2000: 30) and is presented as the last laugh.

In programming terms, the sitcom was designed as a program that might be scheduled during important timeslots -- above all, during prime time -- a program capable of drawing a large audience that might stay on to watch the star-vehicle program broadcast immediately after it. However, in light of their ability to inspire lasting viewer loyalty, sitcoms soon ranked among the highest-rated television programs -- *Friends* is a case in point. Television programs of this kind are produced with family audiences in mind, although sitcoms designed for more specific target audiences, such as women or young people, also began to appear in the 1990s.

While the trend in the development of situation comedy in the US has been a markedly conservative one, more recent series have begun to breathe new life into the format. *The Office* (BBC, 2001-2003), *Arrested Development* (Fox, 2003-2006), *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (HBO, 2000-) and *Extras* (BBC/HBO, 2005-2007) exemplify a generational change in sitcom production, enabling formal innovation within the genre. Such elements as the mixing of fiction and reality, the influence of a documentary or cinematic style, as well as the ways in which characters are depicted and the use of absurd humour, mark a formal break with the classicism that had come to define the genre over the course of the preceding fifty years.

2. The development of the genre of comedy in Spain

The comedy genre in Spain has generally been referred to as "tele-comedy" or "comic series" rather than by the American term, *sitcom*. Humor programs such as sketch shows and, above all, comic series or tele-comedies have a long history in Spain. The Spanish tele-comedy format emerged from the fusion of three distinct genres: the sitcom; the theatrical skit or farce; and the cinema comedy genre of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

On the one hand, Spanish productions have appropriated a number of the defining features of the sitcom: stereotypical characters, a limited number of interior sets, canned laughter, filming in front of a live studio audience, gags as essential aspects of the program's humor, and a star character around which the series revolves.

American and British sitcoms have been on the Spanish TVE channel since the inception of television in Spain. The following were purchased beginning in the late 50s: *Te quiero Lucy* (*I Love Lucy*), *Embrujada* (*Bewitched*), *Un hombre en casa* (*Man About the House*, ITV, 1973-1976), *Enredo* (*Soap*, ABC, 1977-1981), *El show de Bill Cosby* (*The Cosby Show*, NBC, 1984-1992) or *El príncipe de Bel Air* (*The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, NBC, 1990-1996). Through inspiration from American and British sitcoms, various Spanish TV channels created the following: on TVE 1995-1996, *Juntas pero no revueltas* (inspired by *The Golden Girls*, NBC, 1985-1992); on Tele5 2001, *Moncloa, ¿digame?* (inspired by *Spin City*, CBS 1996-2002); on Cuatro 2004, *Matrimonio con hijos* (inspired by *Married with Children*, Fox 1987-1997); on TVE 2001, *Ala...Dina* (inspired by *Bewitched*); and on Tele 5 1999, *7 Vidas* (inspired by *Friends*). The latter demonstrates a great amount of influence from America which is analyzed in this article.

On the other hand, the Spanish tele-comedy has also drawn in significant ways on the legacy of the national theatre tradition -- in particular, the stage farce. This theatrical genre may be defined as a short comic and popular play, characteristic of the so-called "Golden Age" of Spanish literature in the mid-eighteenth century, which was often staged midway through a longer dramatic work or between the acts. Its common features include brevity, a burlesque critique of society and its mores, and the use of colloquial language (Estébanez, 1996):

If we were to set out to define the 'farcical' today, we would more than likely refer to the many tele-comedies that have evolved in such a dramatic fashion in recent times. A number of the scriptwriters and producers involved in such series -- Vicente Escrivá y Sebastián Junyent, for example -- have openly acknowledged their debt to stage farce, which is unsurprising given that such professionals often come from a theatrical background or are aware of the tradition of the genre which is mirrored in significant ways in television comedies. The end result of this process is the television audience's enjoyment of the everyday, domestic lives of characters played by theatre actors in the most theatrical of ways, popular and identifiable types whose mixture of humour and grace is played out in easily recognisable public spaces (pharmacies, supermarkets, neighbourhoods, etc.). (Ríos, 1997: 159)

The following is a select list of the features of the stage farce genre offered by Juan Antonio Ríos Carratalá (Ríos, 1997: 21–22) which might also be attributed to many Spanish tele-comedies:

- an almost folkloric provincialism or localism (life in Andalusia or Madrid, for example);
- commonly recognisable or stereotypical characters;
- the twisting of language to comic ends: plays on words, double entendres, etc.;
- plots and stories tending towards melodrama and sentimentalism;
- many dialogue-based scenes that do not advance the dramatic action;
- usually happy endings;
- normally a moral to the story or some didactic element;
- the use of jokes and puns;
- a conventionalised setting in order to suggest a wider vision of reality;
- depiction of the 'common people';
- an idealization of social settings, wherein negative aspects of reality are occluded;
- given that the function of the genre is to entertain the viewer, a light-hearted, graceful reflection of reality.

Finally, the influence of the Spanish cinema comedy genre of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s -- the tele-comedy's third line of inheritance -- has also had a bearing on the development of this television genre. Among other cinematic productions of the 1960s are to be found the so-called "Spanish comedies" ("españoladas") filmed by such directors as Mariano Ozores, Tito Fernández, Pedro Lazaga and Fernando Palacios. *La ciudad no es para mí* (Lazaga, 1965), *La gran familia* (Palacios, 1962) and *Cómo está el servicio* (Ozores, 1968) are ranked among the most successful of these productions. These films were usually produced with a general audience in mind and included a relatively unsophisticated sense of humor; allusions to sexual or chauvinistic behaviour; and satirical depictions of such character types as the pig-headed or repressed man, the Spanish lady "from a humble background," tourists, and American executives from multinational companies; along with a superficial treatment of women (Torreiro, 1995: 333). A number of well-known actors and actresses played roles in these films, including Paco Martínez Soria, José Luís López Vázquez, Gracita Morales, Antonio Ozores, Concha Velasco, José Sacristán and Alfredo Landa.

One clear sign of the link between the "españoladas" and the tele-comedy is that many of the actors and actresses who worked on such films have also starred in television series: Alfredo Landa in *Lleno por favor* (Antena 3, 1993-1994); José Sacristán in *¿Quién da la vez?* (Antena

3, 1995); Antonio Ozores in *El sexólogo* (TVE 1, 1994); Concha Velasco in *Yo, una mujer* (Antena 3, 1995); Fernando Fernán Gómez y José Luís López Vázquez in *Los ladrones van a la oficina* (Antena 3, 1993-1996); Andrés Pajares in *¡Ay, Señor, Señor!* (Antena 3, 1994-1995); and Lina Morgan in *Hostal Royal Manzanares* (TVE 1, 1995-1998).

Similarly, numerous examples are to be found of scriptwriters, directors and producers whose careers began in comedies for the big screen and who went on to work on the small screen. The professional development of Vicente Escrivá -- scriptwriter, director and producer -- is a case in point. A maker of politically and religiously themed films in the 1950s, he was a leading light of the "Spanish comedy" ("españolada") wave in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, including *Los ladrones somos gente honrada* (1956) and *Cateto a babor* (1970). In the 1990s, he directed some of the first series broadcast on Antena 3, including *Lleno, por favour* (1993-1994), *¿Quién da la vez?* (1995), *Este es mi barrio* (1996) and *Manos a la obra* (1998-2001). More or less the same may be said of José Frade, a prolific producer of tele-comedies who also enjoyed a distinguished career in the cinema industry; *Hermanos de leche* (1994-1997) and *Canguros* (1994-1995) are among the series he developed for Antena 3.

In significant critical commentaries on the Spanish television fiction sector, those working in the development and production of comedy programs have pointed to the series listed above as indigenous and hybrid productions, the result of the sitcom's assimilation to the Spanish cultural context. Tom Roca, the scriptwriter and producer of several series, puts it as follows:

I feel that one principle of the classic sitcom is in operation in Spain, and is the basis for this strange 45 to 50-minute comedy format, sitcom or not, which we have invented ourselves. It's this: the characters are attractive and credible, and the situations depicted reflect our everyday lives. [...] I think that many of the productions sold as situation comedies have ended up being sentimental dramas. I don't know what genre this is. The 'tempo' of a sitcom is twenty-two minutes, the commercial half hour. This has been done in the United States and England for fifty years now; we make 45-minute episodes here and I lose track a little. So, we get into improvisation; apart from some notable exceptions, I think we do improvise in Spain. [...] I'm also reminded of something a friend of mine said to me: 'we've been making private television for four or five years; they've been at it for fifty in the United States.' (Roca, 1995: 64-65)

Other commentators, such as García de Castro, have also noted the distinctive adaptation of the American situation comedy to the Spanish television industry, above all in relation to episode-duration:

Pure situation comedy did not initially find a place in Spain; rather, a local adaptation, a tele-comedy of manners, a mixture of genres, appeared instead. The Spanish version encompasses specific variations. A number of these series have an episode-duration of longer than thirty minutes, which is a Spanish innovation in the format. The extended duration was due to the length of the prime time period and the need to make the production commercially profitable, which in turn prompted the introduction of more dramatic elements in order to encourage viewer loyalty. (García de Castro, 2002: 121)

Some of these theatrical and cinematic features may also be discerned in tele-comedy programs such as *Farmacia de guardia* (Antena 3, 1991-1995), *Los ladrones van a la oficina*, *Compuesta y sin novio* (Antena 3, 1994), *¡Por fin solos!* (TVE 1, 1995), *Villarriba y Villabajo* (TVE 1, 1994) and *Hostal Royal Manzanares*.

3. The influence of *Friends* on the production of television comedy in Spain: *7 vidas*

While the phenomenon is less common, a number of series bearing the mark of the American sitcom in terms of both dramatic structure and production methods have been produced in Spain. The Spanish television public channel TVE and an independent company, Globomedia, each worked on producing American sitcoms in Spain. First, in the late 80s TVE created *Taller de Telecomedia*, a workshop. This workshop produced: *Eva y Adán*, *agencia matrimonial* (TVE, 1990-1991), *Una hija más* (TVE, 1991), *Habitación 503* (TVE, 1993-1994) and *Juntas pero no revueltas* (TVE, 1995). Spanish professionals traveled to the U.S. to study the American production. Because Spanish public television TVE has its own structure, American production was not relevant. The second attempt to produce American-style sitcoms came from Globomedia in the 90s and it was successful. Its most successful sitcom was *7 Vidas*. The relationship between the American sitcom *Friends* and the Spanish tele-comedy *7 Vidas* is the focus of the remainder of this article.

Friends is one of the most successful classic situation comedies in recent times, in the United States and throughout the world. Produced by Warner Brothers and originally broadcast on NBC, the series had high audience ratings from its first episodes onwards. The series tells the stories of a group of twenty-something friends living in New York. With an unbroken run of 10 seasons (230 episodes) on air, the program won a large audience in the United States and beyond (Grandío, 2007) and a very favourable critical response: a total of 55 Emmy Award nominations, for which it won Best Comedy Award in 2003; an average audience of 25 million; its final episode drew 56.2 million viewers, making it the fourth most-watched series finale in American television history, after *MASH* (CBS, 1972-1983), *Seinfeld* and *Cheers*, according to figures made available by Nielsen, the audience rating company. That the four most-watched finale episodes of all time in the United States are from classic sitcoms is noteworthy, a fitting reflection of the popularity of this television genre in the country where it originated. Following ten seasons, a *Friends* spin-off called *Joey* (NBC, 2004-2006), the name of one of the main characters, was developed, though it ran for only three seasons. The scriptwriting team led by Marta Kauffman and David Crane and the producer Kevin Bright traced all kinds of plots within the framework of the classic sitcom. While the series draws on the influence of soap opera, above all in the romantic entanglements among its protagonists, *Friends* is basically a traditional sitcom: stereotypical characters; 22-minute closed episodes; and a primarily multi-camera production system shot on interior sets. The comic situations might centre on a bag, a monkey, a Thanksgiving dinner or the appearance of a special guest star (examples of which include Julia Roberts and George Clooney).

The significant budgets spent on situation comedy production in the United States should also be noted. According to *Forbes* magazine, the average production cost of a sitcom episode in the United States may be as high as \$1.3 million (*Forbes*, 2003); other costs must be added to this figure, such as, for example, the salary contracts of the cast of *Friends*, who received \$1 million for every episode recorded during the last two seasons of the series, making it the most expensive comedy program in the history of television (*El Mundo*, 2004). Regarding production, *Friends* follows the classical sitcom standards. In pre-production, it has the American "writing team" system for the scripts. All cameras record the entire scene from

different angles and edits are made in post-production. The standards of *Friends*' production are as follows:

1. *Duration*: 22 minutes
2. *Support*: Film cameras
3. *No. of episodes broadcast per season*: 24
4. *Programming schedule*: weekly
5. *Locations*: 100% filmed on sound-stage (with rare exceptions)
6. *Sets*: three fixed sets and one multifunctional.

Despite the fact that it was broadcast on the pay-per-view channel Canal +, *Friends* had a large and loyal following and dedicated fan-base in Spain from 1997 onwards. Repeat broadcasts of the series on Canal +, and later on channel Cuatro, were also popular. In their efforts to explain their enthusiasm for the series, many Spanish viewers described *Friends* as a "high quality" series, and sometimes even as a "cult" series (Grandío, 2009), the latter term being used in academic circles almost exclusively in relation to the genre of science fiction. In terms of the fan phenomenon to which it gave rise, *Friends* set a new standard in Spain, which may well have prompted the production company Globomedia to set out to develop a similar project here.

Nevertheless, the enduring legacy of *Friends* is, if anything, even greater than its own success: the series has also influenced the production of domestic series in various countries in significant ways, including also US success *How I Met your Mother* (CBS, 2005-). Soon after its appearance, other series that imitated or were inspired by the American series appeared throughout the world. This has also been the case in Spain, where a number of national series based on the *Friends* model were developed, including *Más que amigos* ("More than just friends," 1997), and the clearest example of all: *7 Vidas*. The influence of *Friends* on the production of *7 Vidas* is explored below.

7 Vidas was produced by Globomedia, one of the most prestigious television fiction production companies in Spain; it began in 1999, and was designed to become the first national sitcom in the strict sense of that term by following the established narrative structure and production process. Two failed attempts at productions of this type -- *Fernández y familia* (Tele 5, 1998) and *Quítate tú pa' ponerme yo* (Tele 5, 1998) -- had been broadcast the previous year. The influence of the worldwide success of *Friends* was to be felt in the original idea for *7 Vidas*. The premise or conflict at the heart of this Spanish production is very similar to that found in *Friends*. The *7 Vidas* scriptwriters openly acknowledged their debt to *Friends* from the very beginning:

Write about a group of thirty-something friends living in an urban setting. Yes, it's very like *Friends*, but instead of Ross or Chandler we have Paco Jimeno, something... a bit more native. (Pastor and de Pando, 2006: 26)

Consequently, the initial conflict and plots of the two first episodes of these comedies are different but both are based on the same dramatic strategy: "the fish out of water." In the case

of *7 Vidas*, the initial conflict was the miraculous recovery of the character Toni Cantó after 18 years in a coma and his integration into an unknown society. In *Friends*, Rachel has left her husband at the altar on her wedding day, escaping from a rich girl's life to enter a world where she must take responsibility for her own needs.

Another indicator of the influence of *Friends* on the Spanish production is reflected in the test designed at Globomedia for prospective scriptwriters on the new series: to write a sequence from *Friends*. The NBC series was a gold standard for the production of *7 Vidas* (Pastor and de Pando, 2006: 43). The episode scriptwriting dynamic was imported wholesale from the American "writing team" system: a group of twelve scriptwriters divided into four sub-groups of three, each with a group head, a second writer and a junior writer, and each sub-group given an average of six weeks per episode. As is the case in the production process pioneered in the United States. When a more or less definitive version of the script had been developed, a Writer's Room meeting was held: the scriptwriters would gather in a locked room to brainstorm gags that might make the episode funnier; later, these were read at the "Italian table" with the actors, to see if the gags would work off the page. This approach to such writing was new to Spain, where most series had been written by independent or freelance scriptwriters, each working separately on scripts for different episodes.

7 Vidas appropriated the narrative structure of the sitcom, with one significant variation: unlike the standard American 22-minute episode, the average running-time was to be 50-55 minutes. Thus, the teaser, the first act, the second act, the ending and the tag are all extended, sometimes in ways that may seem forced.

From 17 January 1999 to 16 April 2006, a total of 204 episodes of *7 Vidas*, distributed across ten seasons, were broadcast, an achievement that included a number of milestones in the production of television comedy in Spain. For example, to mark the series' 200th episode on 12 March 2006, the episode was shot and broadcast live, with guest appearances by members of the original cast in addition to the cast of that season. This was the first live broadcast of such a series in Spain.

The production process for an episode of *7 Vidas* mirrored the standard American model, planned out over five days. The schedule followed by the production company is outlined in the table below.

Table 1. Production process for *7 Vidas* episodes

Day 1: 9:30	Read through script: the director outlines his/her vision of the script, and members of the various production teams note their needs.
10:30	Roundtable: the actors read through the script with the director.
11:30 to 14:30	On-set rehearsal with script: the scene-staging is organized with the actors; the director takes note of positions and movements. This rehearsal is carried out in chronological order; the technical team is not present.
15:00	Rehearsal of the episode for the executive production team: the episode is rehearsed for script and movement, and the executive approves the episode and/or proposes changes to be made.

- Day 2: 9:00 to 14:00 On-set rehearsal: the actors have learned all their lines; rehearsal without costumes or make-up.
- Day 3: 9:30 to 18:30 Technical rehearsal: a full (non-chronological) rehearsal to establish locations and positions, involving all the technical teams and the actors in full costume, make-up and hair. Scenes that cannot be produced live are recorded.
- Day 4: 10:30 to 14:30 General rehearsal: the episode is acted out in chronological order as though it were being filmed, but without an audience present.
- 16:30 to 22:00 Filming of the episode before a live audience: about 100 people seated in tiered rows in front of the sets watch the actors do their work.
- Day 5: Editing and sound-mixing for the episode

Source: data collated by Globomedia.

A further similarity with *Friends* was marked by cameo appearances in the series: the involvement of a large number of well-known personalities in acting roles or playing themselves (for no fee) on the program. More than one hundred famous people from a wide variety of backgrounds participated in this way -- from the fields of politics, sport, journalism, dance, etc. The first cameo appearance on *7 Vidas* came in episode ten with the appearance of Lydia Bosch; other guest stars included Santiago Carrillo, Santiago Segura, Antonio Gala, Samuel Eto'o, David Bisbal, Alfonso Guerra, Miguel Ríos, Fernando Torres, Carlos Herrera and Shakira.

In the field of artistic direction, too, the Spanish series bore a striking resemblance to *Friends* -- in particular, the set design. The series' fixed locations, built on a soundstage, comprise the two living rooms where most of the program's plotlines are played out; in addition, there is the bar ("Casi Ké No") owned by one of the protagonists which, in the opening seasons, was dominated by a type of sofa easily recognizable to any fan of *Friends*.

7 Vidas gradually became a cast-led series in which many characters changed, developed and formed new relationships with other characters already on the program. The series was the most successful and long-lasting sitcom on national television in Spain, and always enjoyed good audience ratings. Indeed, as was the case with *Friends* and *Joey* (NBC, 2004), the series gave rise to the spin-off, *Aída* (Tele 5, 2005), which inherited the production system pioneered on *7 Vidas* -- indeed, most of the artistic-technical team on both series was the same -- and has been a great success with its audience; its sixth season is due to be broadcast soon.

To conclude, on the basis of such series as *7 Vidas* all Spanish sitcoms now encompass the production standards below, which have been assimilated into the Spanish industry and are reflected in its work. These standards may be summarised as follows:

1. *Duration*: between 45 and 70 minutes
2. *Support*: Betacam video
3. *No. of episodes broadcast per season*: 13

4. *No. of episodes produced annually*: 26
5. *Programming schedule*: weekly
6. *Locations*: 100% filmed on soundstage (with rare exceptions)
7. *Sets*: between two and six fixed sets
8. *Characters*: centered on a protagonist played by a well-known actor, the rest of the cast gradually play more significant roles as the series progresses.

4. Conclusions

By and large, the influence of the American sitcom on television comedy production in Spain has been positive, as the example of *7 Vidas* makes clear. Such influence may be discerned in two areas: narrative structure and the production process. The sitcom genre has become embedded in Spain as a successful television format, an achievement that is also due in part to *Aída*, the spin-off from *7 Vidas*, which is one of the programs with the highest audience ratings on Spanish television.

Because they are generally broadcast during prime time, the average running time of Spanish sitcoms is between 50 and 70 minutes, considerably longer than the 22-minute standard in American situation comedy. In relation to production values, Spanish tele-comedies do not possess the large budgets that are invested in such series by big production companies and networks in the United States. The average production cost of a sitcom in Spain is approximately €150,000, whereas the corresponding figure for the United States is \$1.3 million. The most positive effect of the introduction of the American sitcom to the Spanish market is that the tele-comedy production process has become both more standardized and more professional. Moreover, artistic personnel in Spain have adapted the universal themes of television fiction productions to situations and characters that are typically Spanish, thus winning viewer loyalty with relative ease.

Older classic formalities aside, the challenge for the Spanish television industry now is to respond to the renewal of the genre of comedy currently taking place. The new trends in comedy in the 21st century affect narrative structure as well as the design of humor itself, while one of the most interesting factors in this regard centers on the roles of director and producer in such series. At the same time, the Spanish television industry has entered a mature phase, enabling it to contribute to the international market in innovative ways in this time of change. These new evolutionary developments in the DNA of this television genre may run in parallel with more traditional comedy productions that continue to draw their inspiration primarily from the cinematic and theatrical traditions; *La que se avecina* (Tele 5, 2008) and *A ver si llego* (2009), currently in production for the Tele 5 channel, are pertinent examples of the latter.

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