

Volume 38  
issue 2 / 2019

Contracampo e-ISSN 2238-2577  
Niterói (RJ), 38 (2)  
aug/2019-nov/2019

Contracampo – Brazilian Journal of Communication is a quarterly publication of the Graduate Programme in Communication Studies (PPGCOM) at Fluminense Federal University (UFF). It aims to contribute to critical reflection within the field of Media Studies, being a space for dissemination of research and scientific thought.

## REPRESENTATION, IDENTITY AND THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW POLITICAL DISCURSIVITY: sexual and gender minorities in the Merlí series

FERNANDA ELOUISE BUDAG

Postdoctoral researcher at the Communication and Consumption Programme of the Higher Education Advertisement and Marketing School (ESPM). PhD in Communication Sciences from the School of Communication and Arts of the University of São Paulo (ECA/USP). Professor and researcher at The Paulus Faculty of Technology and Communication (FAPCOM) and São Judas Tadeu University (USJT). Member of the research groups MidiAto – Study Group on Language: Mediatic Practices and Juvenália (ESPM-SP) registered at the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq). São Paulo, SP, Brazil. Responsible for part of the empirical analysis.

E-mail: fernanda.budag@gmail.com  
ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6170-9967>

NARA LYA CABRAL SCABIN

PhD candidate at the Communication Sciences Postgraduate Programme of the School of Communication and Arts of the University of São Paulo. Professor at both Journalism and Public Relationship Graduate Programmes of the Anhembi Morumbi University. Member of MidiAto – Study Group on Language: Mediatic Practices and of the Obcom – Observatory of Communication, Freedom of Expression and Censorship. São Paulo, SP, Brazil. Responsible for the description of the methodological procedures, theoretical foundation and part of the empirical analysis.

E-mail: nara.cabral@usp.br  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7121-1142>

PPG|COM Programa de Pós Graduação  
COMUNICAÇÃO  
MESTRADO E DOUTORADO UFF

TO REFERENCE THIS ARTICLE, PLEASE USE THE FOLLOWING CITATION:

Budag, F. E.; Scabin, N. L. C. (2019). Representation, Identity And The Emergence Of A New Political Discursivity: Sexual And Gender Minorities In The Merlí Series. *Contracampo – Brazilian Journal of Communication*, 38 (2)

Submitted on: 10/02/2019 / Accepted on: 07/03/2019

DOI – <http://dx.doi.org/10.22409/contracampo.v38i2.28049>



## Abstract

In the background of our discussions, what moves us is the interest in investigating the representations constructed by the fictional series *Merlí* - a Catalan production available in Brazil since 2016 via the Netflix streaming platform - and its relation to the potentiality of generation of recognition in the social actors who watch the show. We look at this empirical object from the concepts of discourse analysis (Charaudeau, 2010), aiming to study gender and sexuality representations presented by this media product. Unlike other media products, which sometimes produce more invisibility, we support the thesis that *Merlí* contests current representations of minorities, being in tune with an emerging political discursivity of the contemporary times - or a "new political imaginary", according to Fraser (2006).

### Keywords

Discourse; Gender; Sexuality; Subjectivity; Recognition.

## Introduction

It is common, even today, to find fictional media productions that portray teenagers as absent-minded, homosexuals as girly, women as submissive, among many other negative representations that reinforce stereotypes over the mentioned groups and that do not contribute to the visibility of such minorities. More so, in the (failed) attempt to offer visibility, they end up broadening the levels of invisibility as representations carry the potential ability of reinforcing distorted points of view. They do not provide the portrayed social subjects with recognition and otherwise present them negatively to society. That does not seem to be the case in *Merlí*, and throughout this article we intend to argue for our presuppositions in that sense.

Merlí Bergeron (Francesc Orella) is an unemployed philosophy teacher, expelled from his apartment and forced to move in with his mother Carmina Calduch (Anna M. Barbany), a famous actress recognized for her works in television, cinema and especially in the theater. That is how *Merlí's* plot begins, a Spanish television series spoken in Catalan and produced by the TV3 channel along 3 seasons released between 2015 and 2018. Right in its very first episode, Merlí faces additional challenges: looking after his child, the teenager Bruno (David Solans), previously under the care of his ex-wife who was then on the move to Rome. Concomitantly, Merlí starts teaching at the Àngel Guimerà School. Father and son experience difficulties in their relationship - marked by great distance and constant disagreements, since Bruno accuses Merlí of having abandoned him – and it gets worse when the youngster, a freshman at Guimerà High School, finds out who is his new philosophy teacher.

Merlí understands his new professional opportunity not just as a chance of recovering himself financially, but also – and most importantly – as a possibility of doing what he loves the most in life: teaching. He considers himself to be good at what he does and thus changes the school environment with unorthodox educational methods as soon as he starts at the new job. In his first lesson, for example, he takes the students to the schools' kitchen, where he teaches them about the "peripatetic" – or those "walking wanderers" –, the disciples of Aristotle who used to enjoy open air lessons. Soon friction arises with other teachers, such as the bitter Eugeni Bosc (Pere Ponce), Catalan language and literature teacher and head of studies.

Merlí's personality trait – refusing to follow traditional teaching methods, bureaucratic requirements and disciplinary protocols – is often pointed out in the journalistic pieces and television critics dedicated to the series. In this sense, there are recurrent analyzes that point out the series' potential to bring philosophy closer to the daily lives of young people and of the general public. Inácio Araujo, a critic for the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* states that:

For people who live in Brazil, that suffer with ever more restrictive changes in education, [*Merlí*] is able to indicate what is the use of disciplines such as Latin, Philosophy, History... In sum, those that always raise the question of "what is it for" and that so enthusiastically excites the utilitarian hearts of teenagers: what is useless may reveal to be the most precious thing in the end. (Araujo, 25/02/2018, *online*, our translation).

After having its first season dubbed in Spanish and broadcasted by La Sexta Television Network between April and June 2016 in Spain, Netflix buys the rights to the series and in November of the same year releases it to the United States and Latin America. The first season including 13 episodes debuted in Brazil in December 1st 2016, while the second season, also with 13 episodes, and the third season, with 14 episodes, were made available in the country by December 25th 2017 and February 15th 2018 respectively. But it is only in 2018 that Merlí reaches a higher popularity with the Brazilian audiences.

The prestige of the production went up that year in the country after getting the attention of the University of São Paulo Political Philosophy Professor and Brazilian ex-Ministry of Education, Renato Janine Ribeiro. He created a Facebook group in order to debate on the contributions of the series to the

educational field<sup>1</sup> besides teaching courses, publishing analytical content and giving media interviews on the subject. According to Ribeiro, the series contributes to the reflection on how a High School Programme can be "creative, engaging and exciting" and it shows that "good knowledge", far beyond being utilitarian, should be "useful" in life (Ribeiro, 09/03/2018, online, our translation).

As suggested in this brief overview, the echoes of the production in Brazilian media was driven on one hand by the debate on education and the pedagogical models it brings and, on the other, by the relationship between Philosophy and daily life. In the present work, we intend to highlight an overall neglected aspect by the critiques on Merlí: its potential to encourage identity policies and to enable processes of recognition.

Our main hypothesis is that the series is marked by a constant dialogue with aspects of a contemporary discursiveness that supports a specific conformation of contemporary political struggles – which, in the words of Nancy Fraser (2006), can be understood as the emergence of a "new political imaginary". As we intend to develop further in this paper, based on Fraser's propositions and in the works of Hall (1994, 1997), contemporaneity can be defined by a *discursive formation* (Foucault, 2012) that puts *identity* and *representation* as essential guidelines for the articulation of demands and political claims<sup>2</sup>.

We depart from a theoretical framework that presupposes the fundamental intertwining among discourse, representation, identity and subjectivation. Considering this approach, our theoretical-methodological background are the propositions of Michel Foucault (2008, 2012) and authors in the field of Discourse Analysis representing one of the most valued trends in the communicational field (Charaudeau, 2010). In order to apply such notions, we focus on the discourses for the recognition of gender and sexual diversity (centered in the representation of minorities) present in Merlí.

We are considering the three seasons of the series, focusing mostly in aspects of the characters' building. More specifically, we concentrate on the description of minorities' representations – those that may potentially generate recognition – and in the observation of the series' central issues through which we are able to identify circulating discourses (Charaudeau, 2010)<sup>3</sup>. Among what we are considering to be minorities, we pay special attention to the representations of homosexuality and transgenerness; but we also dedicate a final section of the analysis to the representation of women; and, finally, we question, when appropriate, how male representations are operated.

## Discourse, Representation and Identity

We undertake the concept of *representation* in a *discursive* perspective. The propositions of Michel Foucault on discourse have opened new paths to the understanding of representational matters (Hall, 2016, p. 78). They are tributary of the linguistic theories of the beginning of the 20th century that

---

<sup>1</sup> The article is entitled *Merlí e a filosofia no Ensino Médio* (Merlí and High School Philosophy), the Facebook group (in Portuguese) can be found under the following link: [https://www.facebook.com/Merlí%C3%A-D-e-a-filosofia-no-ensino-m%C3%A9dio-148701185851349/?hc\\_ref=ARS1UbJ4IOY9ebvW54Sd-4kq6rA-1DbuU9d6VZEiVaQX2Fbj6nR7DnllDnVwrIcEw-JE&fref=nf](https://www.facebook.com/Merlí%C3%A-D-e-a-filosofia-no-ensino-m%C3%A9dio-148701185851349/?hc_ref=ARS1UbJ4IOY9ebvW54Sd-4kq6rA-1DbuU9d6VZEiVaQX2Fbj6nR7DnllDnVwrIcEw-JE&fref=nf)

<sup>2</sup> We consider that the subjectivation practices within a culture are given in relation to its discourses – the discursive formations that cross and shape the subjects – in such a way that when mentioning the emergence of a specific political subjectivity in contemporaneity – or of a specific way the political subjects and the political agency are shaped –, it is impossible to ignore its underlying discourses.

<sup>3</sup> In a Foucaultian sense, considering the implications of the discourses in terms of power and in the shaping of identities, we grasp the representations built in Merlí. Nevertheless, in order to better operate with Foucault's conceptual appointments, we had to undertake the notion of circulating discourses as found in Patrick Charaudeau (2010), an author that, in spite of specific nuances, closely dialogues with Foucault's thinking. We highlight Charaudeau's perspective on circulating discourses as it is quite explanatory and can be potentially operated more easily for the analysis. It refers to a specific materiality which is much more easily identified in the corporeality of a specific corpus. In that sense we understand that circulating discourses are "an empirical gathering of enunciations towards a definition on beings, actions, events, characteristics, behaviors and judgments related to them". (Charaudeau, 2010, p. 118, our translation).

decisively shaped the so called "linguistic turn", especially in the perspective of Ferdinand de Saussure, but at the same time they bring important shifts to the aforementioned theories.

Foucault approaches the production of knowledge and meaning through discourse and in fact analyses specific text and representations as the semioticians did. However, he has a greater tendency of analyzing the whole discursive formation to which the text or practice belongs. His concern falls over the knowledge generated by human and social sciences organizing the behavior, the understanding, the practice and belief, the regulation of the bodies as well as entire populations. (Hall, 2016, p. 92, our translation).

Cultural Studies' perspective is of our keen interest as it emphasizes the power in how representation structures individual and collective identities. The discursive manifestation of representations offer possible subject-positions in a way that the shaping of an individual identity is always defined by socially build and shared collective representations (Gomes, 2008). In fact, it is impossible to separate social representation, discourse and identity as much as social practices and subjectivities. Subjectivity is built through socially spread and culturally based positionings that precede it (Gomes, 2008, p. 105) – so we understand that representations and media driven meanings offered to the subjects are elements that engage subjectivities.

Discourse provides a *place to the subject* (meaning the reader or spectator that is "subjected" to the discourse) in which specific meanings and understandings make sense. In that perspective it is inevitable that all individuals become subject of a given discourse during a certain period of time carrying its power/knowledge. But in order for them – us – to perform it, it is necessary to put oneself/ourselves in the position from which the discourse makes the best sense. So we become its "subjects" being ourselves "subjected" to its meanings, power and regulation. All discourses build subject positionings from which they make sense by themselves. (Hall, 2016, p. 100, author's highlights, our translation).

In that sense, we consider that the discursive formations in a given culture base possible models/ places for the agency and constitution of subjects. We also understand that contemporaneity is shaped by the emergence of a specific political discursivity which is related to particular ways of organizing struggles and political claims, putting identity and representations in the center of the battlefield. Our hypothesis in this article is based on the idea that such discursivity is in the core of the way Merli, exemplarily to other media productions, evokes gender and sexual representations. It entails the presentation and the tensing of potential places for the subjects in the contemporary world.

In the attempt of approaching the discourses that arise from our selected media production, we assume that the representations built on the series are able to reflect the emergence of a "new political imaginary". Fraser (2006) translates it in terms of a shift from a redistribution imaginary to a recognition one in the struggle for social justice. In other words, these struggles in contemporaneity are not anymore centrally founded in claims for a more equal distribution of wealth but on demands for the recognition of diversity (Honneth; Fraser, 2006).

In such context, instead of legitimating political parties, what is at stake is the fight for recognition of the demands related to identity issues and disputes over language, discourse and representation. According to Fraser, the very Axel Honneth's recognition theory is the expression of "the displacement of the central role attributed to the distributive paradigm of justice in favor of a paradigm centered on issues of identity and difference" (Bressiani, 2011, p. 334). In such emerging discursivity, identity categories as gender and sexuality become crucial to political mobilization.

According to Fraser (2006), the claims for recognition are known for shedding light on the specificity of certain groups – or, in the words of the author herself, they generate such specificity "performatively" – in order to state its value. So, *affirmative* and *transformative* propositions within the political discourse on

recognition and within the field of multiculturalism try to compensate for the discrimination and disrespect present in the value attribution for discriminated identities (affirmative proposals), or they deconstruct binary oppositions and subvert the cultural-value structure found on the basis of discrimination (Fraser, 2006).

It is also in the context of the emergence of the struggles for recognition and under the crisis after lost hopes in socialism and the success of a social welfare State that Stuart Hall sees the uprising of identity policies with the mobilization factor set on shared social identities (such as of women, black people, gay people, etc.). Such shift reveals, according to the author, the expansion of the political practice from the public environment to the private one: that of informal social interactions and pictures of daily life. In result, the matters that were traditionally considered to be non-political – such as those of the family life like marriage and sexual relationships – gain political relevance. If in the past the main contradictions of social life were, from a leftist perspective, economic exploitation and the existence of social classes, the contemporary context is marked by the proliferation of conflicted social places that include issues of gender, race, sexuality, etc. (HALL, 1994, p. 167).

According to the author, an important mobilizing force for the epistemological shifts and discursive reconfigurations are the very impacts of feminism "as a theoretical criticism as much as a social movement" (Hall, 2019, p. 27). Being part of the "new social movements" that emerge in the 60's, feminism favors the changes in knowledge and in the political action configured in contemporaneity. Since the beginning it brought up challenges to the classical division between "public" and "private", and emphasized that the way one is shaped as a gendrifed subject is a political and social issue, thus politicizing subjectivity. Although feminism started as a movement opposed to the social role of women, it has expanded to include the debate on the shaping of sexual and gender identities as well. All of these issues seem somehow to be invoked by the circulating discourses that cross our object of study as we shall see moving forward.

All of those reconfigurations in the contemporary political picture are still centered in Western world culture, specifically in the phenomenon of great expansion of everything related to the culture in the second half of the 20th century. In result, culture gains constitutive relevance in all aspects of social life and acquires analytical and explanatory power in social theories.

Such shift is related to an "interest in language as a general term to define representational practices. To language is given a privileged position in the building and circulation of meaning" (Hall, 1997, p. 28). In that sense, it is a revolution in the way we understand the relationship between "reality" or the objects of the world and the words we use to describe it. Fundamentally, such revolution – the so-called "linguistic turn" – brought up the idea that meaning does not emerge from things themselves but from the systems we use to categorize them.

As the author points out, all of our perception of the identity building process had to be completely restored under the light of our interest in culture and the centrality it gained. This process of profound epistemological revision is connected with the emergence of identity policies and the imaginary of recognition conceptualized by Fraser (2006). Moreover, it is these theoretical rearticulations that enable us to think media productions as generators of visibilities and thus of identities and subjectivities. We are radically in the face of the same discursive formation ruling the production of discourses in many areas of the social life. Considering circulating discourses and its relation to discursive formations, in the next pages we try to bring evidence of the way the series Merlí seems to challenge some sexual and gender minority representations present in popular culture and in the mass media<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>4</sup> The analysis proposed in this paper tries to establish a dialogue with Stuart Hall's (2016) thoughts on the practices of stereotypification and creation of representational regimes based on the establishment of differences (in the case of the author in question, the focus of his work falls under racial regimes of representation). As much as Hall (2016, p. 140), we also refer to regimes of representation evoked by "images found in popular culture and in mass media". The expression "popular culture", far from addressing a principle of cultural essentialism or endorsing dichotomic perceptions on culture – since an "authentic" popular

## The Theme of Diversity and Affirmative Identities

Merlí presents a first level of approach to circulating discourses which is associated to the political imaginary around demands for recognition: such elementary level of connection will be referred to as *thematizing diversity*, discrimination and the challenges involving gender and sexuality. It is the first aspect that indicates the enrolment of the series in an imaginary of *recognition*. In a more profound sense, such affiliation is also translated in terms of *affirmation* of the representation of sexual and gender minorities – at first the series provides the characters with *visibility* but later it also represents them through a *specific* visibility. It is possible to understand how those representations are discursively shaped considering some characters of the series.

The first element to be considered in the present analysis is the presence of homosexual teenagers at the school and the central role they play in the plot. The visibility given to homosexuality is evidenced, for example, in the case of Bruno, son of the main character of the series. In the 11th episode, the character of Oliver (Iñaki Mur) arrives at the school and his explicit acceptance of his own homosexuality causes an initial awkwardness among the other classmates – including Bruno. Also in the first season, we met the complex Pol (Carlos Cuevas), the most popular boy in the classroom, initially known as heterosexual and "womanizer", whose relationship with his own sexuality remains "troubled" in the first chapters. Another relevant element is the visibility given to transgenerness through the character of Quima (Manel Barceló), a trans woman who during the 7th episode of the second season arrives at the Àngel Guimerà to be a substitute English teacher. Although the creators of the series show a clear intention of giving visibility to gender and sexual diversity, it is important to observe that a lot of the minorities are left out of the plot, such as lesbians and trans men, for example.

In order to approach the debates raised by the series, we find necessary to review the matter of the representation of *difference* significantly found in Cultural Studies, especially regarding the focus given by academic works to alterity (Gomes, 2008).

According to Hall (2016), current representational practices are typical of the mass media environment, including the construction of stereotypes in order to represent alterity, which is something at the same time necessary and dangerous. Hall (2016, p. 154) reminds us that although we are not able to operate without the establishment of binary oppositions, they end up becoming reductionist and simplifying, "shadowing all distinctions". The author also reminds us that there are very few neutral binary oppositions because there is always a dominant pole – "the one to include the other in its field of action" – that is, the "One", which is opposed to the "Other". "We should in fact write **white/black**, **men/women**, **male/female**, **upper class/lower class**, **British/foreigners** to capture the power dimension of discourses" (Hall, 2016, p. 155, author's highlights). Based on an anthropological perspective, Hall (2016) stresses that although the establishment of differences is essential to the symbolic order we know as culture, it can generate negative feelings when we are faced with everything that is "out of order", considered to be impure or abnormal.

In the case of Merlí, when we focus on the representation of gender and sexual minorities we are talking about the identity representation most commonly placed as the "Other" in mass media. In that sense, besides the fact that the series gives visibility to gender and sexual minorities, we are also interested in understanding *how* the representations are built. As we have previously pointed out we intend to verify the hypothesis that the *affirmative* trait of the representations in the series resides in

---

culture or a culture able to place itself outside the force field of cultural production practices does not exist –, refers to the notion of "common culture".

the adoption of the very strategies of representation. To that intent, it is necessary that we take a more attentive look in some of the characters of the production.

## Beyond Heterosexuality

In the beginning of the first episode of the show's first season, Bruno, who experiences the changes in his life in a conflicted way – until that moment he had been under the care of his mother with whom he has a good relationship and then went to live with his distant and moody father –, is presented to the audience during his ballet class. In the common sense and in the universe of the media, that is an image frequently associated to an ideal of femininity. We understand that the representation of Bruno's character is based on the tensioning of the binomial masculinity/femininity, attaching elements which would be in principle "feminine" in a body whose visibility is associated with "masculinity". During the subsequent chapters of the series, the personal dramas experienced by Bruno are, to a great extent, the anguishes resulting from the fear of public coming out as a homosexual and of revealing his feelings for Pol.

At first the representation of homosexuality seen in the case of Bruno seems to be reduced to the principle of *difference*, that is, it seems to reinforce the condition of "alterity" of homosexuality in a society whose hegemonic discourses value heterosexuality as a model to sexual orientation. However, during the first season, such logic seems to be gradually tensioned and we watch a complexification of Bruno's personality. It does not take him long to attest his homosexuality to others: during the second chapter he opens up to his best friend Tània (Elisabet Casanovas); in the fourth chapter, Pol starts to be suspicious about Bruno's sexuality while he denies it; in the ninth episode, Bruno and Pol get intimate during a party at Mônica's (Júlia Creus) house.

We will return to Pol's case further on this article in order to talk about Oliver's character, presented to us in the eleventh chapter of the first season. Just for now we are interested in pointing out that, in the case of Bruno, what we see is a representation of homosexuality that although related to the difficult process of "coming out of the closet" – to which many stereotypical media representations of homosexuals are reduced to – is not limited to it. That is so because the character has his sexual orientation recognized throughout the series by the people that surround him without it being an awkward factor or without turning into a problem for him, his family and friends. In other terms, his "essence" as a character is not reduced to homosexuality, to the establishment of such a *difference*; the fact that he is an homosexual is just another aspect of his personality. It is interesting to notice that even Bruno's "negative" traits – aspects of lust and narcissism, materialized in the lack of interest in listening to the outbursts of Tània or, for example, in the episode in which he makes jokes over his friend's physical appearance behind her back – has no relation to his sexual orientation.

The character of Oliver, on his turn, gives evidence of a representational strategy for homosexuality different from Bruno's. In his case, sexual orientation is not presented as a source of inner conflicts; he does not experience, at least during the series' period of time, the drama of coming out as homosexual. Nevertheless, he embodies many of the stereotypical aspects of the "feminine" homosexual, which includes being rejected by friends for his "outgoing" way. Even if we understand the topicality of such model of representation in media productions and the simplifying nature of every stereotype (Hall, 2016), it is important to highlight a certain ambiguity mobilized by the series in relation to it. The plot itself presents the conflict over the discriminatory and awkward reaction as another way to subjectively experience homosexuality.

In other words, the series mobilizes a negative stereotype many times attributed to homosexuals so that it can challenge its negativity and attribute a positive value to it in the sequence. Such strategy can be related to what Hall (2016, p. 2019) identifies as challenging "through the eyes of representation",

acting within the complexities and ambivalences of representation as the author questions racist representations in popular culture and mass media.

It is a strategy that underpins the never ending nature of representations and enters the fight *for* representation. It turns preferably to *forms* of representation than to its content and thus transforms stereotypes in a way that they work against themselves. It is interesting to observe the complexity present in the building of the character at matter, going beyond the effeminate gay man – supposedly futile – as he is concerned with collectiveness and is engaged in the fights for sexual minorities rights (different from Bruno, who positions himself against that fight).

The third character that is worth observing is Pol, who mobilizes particularly complex representations. Throughout the series he establishes relationships with both men and women, and, by the end, during the third season, he does not hide the fluidity of his sexuality anymore. Although we may, for that reason, consider him to be bisexual, that and every other classifying labels are not undertaken by him. He explicitly positions himself against any defining label. There is a reason why Pol plays the role of Merlí's pupil and heir of his Socratic verve to challenge the norms, powers and institutions.

That is maybe the most relevant element on the representation performed by such character: overcoming the binomial *heterosexual/homosexual* and thus it is the greatest expression of the refusal to establish the *difference* in the series context. In the last chapter, which projects the lives of the main characters to the future after they have finished High School, we see him sharing a life with Bruno. Still, his challenging and open to change nature recovers something fluid and unfinished in his identity and makes us question if that is in fact his final love/family arrangement.

## Representations of Femininity and Transgenderness

It is also possible to highlight some specific constructions established in the series around the representation of the female characters. Although we cannot consider that the simple fact of the series presenting women as characters is a way to a diverse visibility, since it is usual that audiovisual productions include female characters in quantity. Nevertheless, the way it is done seems to give evidence of a concern in reassuring representations that somehow are opposed to stereotypical representations of this group.

That is how, on one hand, it is necessary to challenge the very character of Merlí: although we are not able to present a deep analysis of such argument in the limited pages of this article, it is necessary to stress that we are addressing a production that brings a male main character, cisgender and heterosexual. Although he is at times questioned in his male chauvinist attitudes along the plot (for example, his quite absent attitude as a father) he activates traditional representations of masculinity. On the other hand, the series also presents women occupying places of power and leadership in the domestic environment – many of the homes are ruled by women, such is the case of the families of Ivan, Gerard and Merlí himself, during the period he lives in his mother's house – and at work – besides Coralina (Pepa López), we highlight the case of Silvana (Carlota Olcina), History teacher appearing after the third season.

It is noticeable that Silvana is the only character to really rival Merlí and dispute influence over the students – we may even wonder if presenting a female character that really has prominence in the school/professional environment is not a late concern<sup>5</sup> on the part of the series' creators. It said in a different way: the only character to stand out for her creativity and innovative didactics and to become Merlí's contender in his popularity with the students is a woman.

In fact, even if her being a woman is not an issue brought by the series or explicitly debated in

---

<sup>5</sup> We understand that such addition helps break a little the representation of Merlí as "the one with the reason". Until then, rationality was centered in his character, a heterosexual man, cisgender, represented on the basis of traditional elements of masculinity, reinforcing a crystalized image of manhood in a patriarchal society. That means reinforcing a stereotype while trying to break with many others.

it, Silvana does not come forward as a fragile character and does not face restrictions in her professional environment because she is a woman or because she lives her sexuality in an autonomous and free way, which is interesting: as the series validates that type of representation, it sets itself apart from stereotypical representations of women and contributes to the affirmation of a positive representation of femininity.

Another point to be highlighted is the way the series presents the acquisition of self-esteem by the character Tânia, who initially feels undertaken for being overweight but during the third season ends up being the most desired teenager in the classroom and reaches a more healthy relationship with her own body. All female representations presented here seem to be in consonance with the agenda proposed by the discourses on recognition – reflecting issues such as female empowerment and sorority<sup>6</sup> - as an example, in the last seasons of the series the teenager female characters build a relationship of mutual solidarity nurtured by an awakening of consciousness over their common condition as women in society.

The last character to deserve our attention in this analysis is the trans teacher Quima: it is interesting to notice that although she is accepted in a more or less receptive way by the other teachers – in spite of some initial looks in awkwardness being noticed especially in order to state properly the subject of the episode –, she is discriminated by the director of the school, Coralina – the villain in the second season –, who does not consider her to be a "real" woman and insists on calling her by her male name, Joaquim. As Quima arrives at the school, Merlí teaches his students on Judith Butler<sup>7</sup> and prepares them to welcome the new teacher, asking them to copy from the board characteristics usually attributed to heterosexual men and women as cells of monogamous relationships.

When Merlí asks the students to repeat what they had learned about rules, Ivan Blasco (Pau Poch) is the first to speak up saying: "fuck the rule". Afterwards, when the teacher compels them to rip the notes, Pol is the first to tear up the notebook sheet. Then Quima enters the classroom visibly embarrassed and says: "I am not sure what Merlí told you, but it wasn't necessary. My name is Quima. And that is it". After telling the student she would be with them just for a few days and that she hoped to teach some useful words for their lives so they could remember her, she concludes: "For me it is important not be invisible". Therefore, we find that such media production is positioned as structuring of visibilities.

The teacher is welcome by the students in a warm way and they accept her as a woman. In spite of Merlí's effort to support her, his attitude as a coworker putting himself as a mediator between her and the students bothers Quima as it sets the difference, which is clear in the following dialogue: "Listen, philosopher... You like me just because I am different [...] Come on and say it: 'Quima, nice to meet you. You are the platypus of this Ark of Noah", she says to Merlí. As we can see, different discursive layers are given on the matter of transgenerness in the series. If, on the one hand, the arrival of Quima represents the contact with the different, her very character, although demanding to be accepted while trying to

---

<sup>6</sup> As a constructive element of its discursivity, the series seems to activate - even if in a restricted way - dialogues with core aspects of feminisms, the metaphor of "sorority" based on the opposition female versus male and a perception on identity processes that would "naturally" be female; on the other hand, different approaches within feminist theories challenge that idea as they point out the complexity of the building of identities and consider the diverse ways of female shared living and complicity against male domination. Among the first authors to question such notion of female representation is Julia Kristeva. In the present days, however, it is noticeable the emergence of feminist media manifestations mainly among social media users that – enouncing it explicitly or not – appropriate the concept as a form of reference to the establishment of networks of solidarity among women against forms of oppression or a way to critique the rivalry among women seen as the expression of internalized chauvinism. It is interesting to notice that such "media" and "digital" expression of the "sorority" is strongly anchored in a network organization and in movements articulated via hashtags in new fields of debate. Such is the "up to date" version of the concept that the series seem to evoke more directly.

<sup>7</sup> That is another topical evidence of the dialogue between the series and feminist theories and gender studies. Understanding gender as performativity (Salih, 2012), Butler's theoretical framework is also present in our work and it is important for the comprehension of the political discursivity emerging in contemporaneity and its emergence in the form of identity policies. Nevertheless, we should note that over the entire Merlí production including 40 episodes – each one of them presenting a philosopher/theoretician or philosophical trend –, only three of them address the works of women: Hipárquia (fifth episode of the second season), Butler (as we have described) e Hannah Arendt (fifth episode of the third).

make diversity visible, refuses to have her subjectivity limited to the condition of "Other".

Moreover, Quima challenges the need of having a mediator between her and society (represented by the students). Neither would she need that such a mediator be a cisgender heterosexual man that still evokes many traits of a male conventional legitimated representation, as we have argued: when some sexual promiscuity is socially accepted of his part; when he is always the one heard in conflict mediation between parents and students; also when he reproduces the role of the absent father in his son's life (at least during his childhood, not shown in the series but addressed in the son's speeches). It would be really interesting to question the choices made by the producers for a male heterosexual main character, reinforcing male conservative figures. But at the same time we understand that the series somehow tensions such solidified masculinity when it presents Pol as Merlí's successor in the final chapter of the third season.

Still on the same episode, when the students become aware that Coralina wanted to push Quima away from the High School, they organize a protest with the help of Merlí in which the boys dress as girls and vice-versa. One of the only students in the classroom to be momentarily resistant to the idea is Bruno – who at the same episode had quarreled with Oliver on the necessity of organizing collectively for the rights of sexual minorities –, a subtlety that reveals how complex identity processes are. Even if in a restricted way, we are able to question the "form" of activism materialized in the clothes that carry, on their turn, a social gender normativity: even when each gender is using "switched" clothing to give visibility to the acceptance of diversity, they also end up stating that there the clothes are actually "switched". The same critique on gender dress code can also be directed to Quima herself: in order to state herself as a (trans) woman, she uses clothes that would be typically female (such as skirts for example) in a time were (cis) women tend to subvert the rule (using pants and not skirts for example, as Silvana does, a woman presented in the series as having a strong personality).

## Final Considerations

The representations present in Merlí point to the acceptance and valuing of sexual and gender diversity. As we have tried to demonstrate, it is possible to identify that the affiliation to an ideal of recognition is given at first through the *thematization* of gender and sexuality, through the discrimination and prejudice against minorities and also through the establishment of a common agenda and discourse related to the discursive formation at matter. In the following moment it is possible to identify the presence of recognition discourses in the series by *affirmative* means of representing diversity following specific strategies that we have tried to briefly recover in the previous topics. In general terms, these strategies seem to defy the representational regimes based on the establishment of difference in terms of gender and sexuality as ways to shape identities.

One of those strategies is the questioning of stereotypes frequently used in media productions in order to represent sexual minorities and especially homosexuals. That is what happens, for example, in the case of Bruno, who quickly overcomes his definition as gay, coming out of the closet and refusing to identify as the image of an "effeminate" homosexual. At the same time he questions whether it would be worth fighting for the LGBTQ+ cause. Another strategy is refusing to establish the *difference* as a way to not limit the identity of characters. That is quite evident for example in Quima's lines – as we have tried to show – and in the case of Pol, who transits between different identities and refuses the assumption of a well finished identity.

It is also possible to draw a parallel between the debate brought by Hall (2016) on the emerging strategies of a racial representation regime and those identified in the object we have analyzed notwithstanding the particularities of each case. We have noticed, for example, as we described Oliver's case, that the way his character is shaped in the series seems to illustrate a strategy of undertaking a

stereotype in order to subvert it from "within". However, in any case we have analyzed, the strategy that seems to remain in the background is the one that Hall (2016) identifies as negative image replacement for positive images, expanding the range of representations of groups historically represented in a derogatory way through a principle of acceptance and celebration of difference – understood here not as *difference* anymore in a binary conception, but as diversity.

In consonance with the discursive formation of recognition, it is also possible to identify in the series a dialectics of representation of gender and sexual diversity based on a movement in which identities primarily related to the different – see the cases of the characters of Quima, Oliver and Bruno, for example – overcome binary logics of the representations of identities through the unfoldings of the conflicts in the plot. In other words, as we have tried to demonstrate, the narrative of the shaping of characters that represent sexual and gender minorities in Merlí tries to embody the movement of difference -> *diversity* – or, in other words, *alterity* -> *different identities*.

Considering the analysis we have proposed here, we would like to highlight the possibility of debating over other contributions of the production to education, beyond those already pointed out by journalistic and academic criticism as we have briefly tried to recover in the beginning of the present work. Instead of the contribution of the series for the debate on pedagogical methods, the role of the school or philosophical content, we believe that Merlí is pregnant with educommunication potentialities since it can be a resource for the classroom in the debate of issues related to gender and sexuality. Going far beyond the analysis centered in the series' content, it may be adopted as a starting point of broader debates on the opacity of discourses in our society.

Finally, it is appropriate to highlight that although we have not performed a reception study in order to validate our perceptions – it was not our purpose but we incentive that it should be done –, we argue that there are many possible layers in the generation of knowledge for the social actors considering the many representations built in the series, especially in respect of representations associated with gender minorities and sexual diversity, which was our main focus here; even if it still reproduces some crystalized traits of very traditional masculinities in the very figure of the main character Merlí.

Different from other media productions that at times end up producing more invisibilities – as they reproduce stereotypes or in many other ways –, we sustain the thesis that Merlí represents a production profoundly in consonance with the – discursive, epistemological, subjective – revision of what we are able to find today in the field of political struggles, given its connection to circulating discourses and an imaginary of recognition. In that sense, the series is put in an ongoing dialogue with central social matters of our time.

## References

Araujo, Inácio. (2018, January 19). Protagonista de 'Merlí' utiliza filosofia como 'pau pra toda obra'. Retrieved from: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrada/2018/01/1951575-protagonista-de-merli-utiliza-filosofia-como-pau-para-toda-obra.shtml>. Accessed in: 10/23/2018.

Araujo, Inácio. (2018, February 25). 'Merlí' mantém inventividade até o fim. Retrieved from: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrada/2018/02/merli-mantem-inventividade-ate-o-fim.shtml>. Accessed in: 10/23/2018.

Bressiani, Nathalie. (2011). Redistribuição e reconhecimento – Nancy Fraser entre Jürgen Habermas e Axel Honneth. *Caderno CRH*, Salvador, v. 24, n. 62, pp. 331-352. Retrieved from: <http://www.scielo.br/pdf/ccrh/v24n62/a07v24n62.pdf>. Accessed in: 10/23/2018.

Charaudeau, Patrick. (2010). *Discurso das mídias*. São Paulo: Contexto.

Fraser, Nancy; Honneth, Axel. (2006). *¿Redistribución o reconocimiento?*. Madrid: Morata.

Fraser, Nancy. (2006). Da redistribuição ao reconhecimento? Dilemas da justiça numa era pós-socialista. *Cadernos de Campo*, São Paulo, n. 14/15, p. 231-239. Retrieved from: <http://www.revistas.usp.br/cadernosdecampo/article/viewFile/50109/54229>. Accessed in: 10/23/2018.

Foucault, Michel. (2008). *A ordem do discurso*. São Paulo: Loyola.

Foucault, Michel. (2012). *A arqueologia do saber*. Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária.

Gois, Antônio. (2018, June 18). Merlí e os afetos na escola. Retrieved from: <https://blogs.oglobo.globo.com/antonio-gois/post/merli-e-os-afetos-na-escola.html>. Accessed in: 10/23/2018.

Gomes, Mayra Rodrigues. (2008). *Comunicação e identificação: Ressonâncias no jornalismo*. São Paulo: Ateliê editorial.

Hall, Stuart. (2016). *Cultura e representação*. Rio de Janeiro: Apicuri.

Hall, Stuart. (1997). A centralidade da cultura: notas sobre as revoluções culturais do nosso tempo. *Educação & Realidade*, v. 22, n. 2, pp. 15-46. Retrieved from: <http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/educacaoerealidade/article/view/71361>. Accessed in: 01/28/2019.

Hall, Stuart. (1994). Some 'politically incorrect' pathways through PC. In: Dunant, Sarah (Ed.). *The war of the words: the political correctness debate*. London: Virago, p. 164-183. Retrieved from: <http://www.ram-wan.net/restrepo/hall/some%20politically%20incorrect%20pathways.pdf>. Accessed in: 02/02/2019.

Hall, Stuart. (2019). *A identidade cultural na pós-modernidade*. Rio de Janeiro: Lamparina.

Ribeiro, Renato Janine. (2018, March 09). Série Merlí, da Netflix, mostra como conectar ensino médio à vida do jovem. Retrieved from: <http://porvir.org/serie-merli-da-netflix-mostra-como-conectar-ensino-medio-a-vida-do-jovem/>. Accessed in: 10/23/2018.

Salih, Sara. (2012). *Judith Butler e a teoria queer*. São Paulo: Autêntica.