

# ***The Triplets* and an Analysis of the Reception of Their Female Media Characters**

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## *Abstract*

The art of storytelling continues to captivate children and adults because of its magic journey into the world of imagination and dreams. This research paper focuses on the reception of the Triplets, three illustrated female child characters who become media characters. It also studies the gender impact it has on 170 eight-year-olds through the feminine models they embody. This study follows previous research by Prats & Ambròs (2007). Final conclusions show that the roles and gender The Triplets exhibit are not received by the 170 children in a uniform way. Besides, the intertextualities<sup>1</sup> of each sister with other male and female characters in the literary and media world confirm that relations are established mostly in the media field and not so much in the literary field. Apart from this, direct correlations are established between the sex of the interviewee/informant and the sex of the character chosen.

Die Erzählungskunst verzaubert alle Kinder und Erwachsene auch noch heute noch wegen ihrer magischen Reise durch die Welt der Fantasie und der Träume. Diese Untersuchung bringt die Rezeption von drei beschriebenen weiblichen Charakteren – Die Drillinge (Helena, Anna und Theresa) – und ihre genderspezifische Auswirkung auf eine Gruppe von 170 achtjährige Kinder. Die Studie folgt der vorhergehenden Untersuchung von Prats & Ambrós (2007). Abschließende Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Rollen und Geschlechter der Drillinge von den 170 Kinder nicht gleich rezipiert werden. Die Intertextualität jeder Schwester mit anderen männlichen und weiblichen Charakteren in der Literatur und in den Medien bestätigt, dass die Beziehungen im Kontext der Medien und nicht im literarischen Kontext gebildet werden. Darüber hinaus gibt es enge Beziehungen zwischen dem Geschlecht des Befragten und dem Geschlecht des ausgewählten Charakters.

## **Introduction**

The art of storytelling keeps captivating children and adults alike as it takes them on a magic journey into the world of fantasy and dreams. Princesses, princes, witches, fairy godmothers, queens, donkeys and an endless list of traditional characters from classic stories have made up the literary and fantastic world of children. Through juvenile literature, children and adolescents learn symbols, habits, roles and models which are integrated into their educational and social behaviours. The phenomenon depends on the meaning each reader attributes to these elements according to his/her personality in addition to his/her social and reading experience (Colomer 1999). We cannot forget that the treatment of the inequality of gender in literature,

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<sup>1</sup> See footnote 9 for a definition of the concept.

over a prolonged period, is the mirror image of a model of society which is undergoing change. Nevertheless, many stereotypes and discriminatory roles are still evident in certain literary and media contexts. Consequently, developing critical analysis is fundamental to understand the messages that we receive.<sup>2</sup>

At present, the art of storytelling is not restricted to the oral tradition of narrating stories or to individuals reading them. TV screens have emerged as a new element that has taken on the narrator's role in storytelling. Paraphrasing Buckingham (2003), the media are the other teacher that always enjoys success. In this context, our conception of narrative is based on Ryan's definition: "Though no medium is better suited than language to make explicit the logical structure of narrative, it is possible to study narrative in its nonverbal manifestations without applying the communicative model of verbal narration" (2004, p. 15). Television cartoons exhibit non-verbal communication, information and roles. Within this framework, this paper aims to study one such TV series: *The Triplets*. Our aim is to see how 170 eight-year-old Catalan children perceive these three little girls. The reason for this choice is two-fold: on the one hand, the topics treated in *The Triplets* are universal and include classical and traditional stories from different cultures; on the other hand, there is the question of the series' popularity: It is shown in 158 countries and *The Triplets* is broadcast in 35 different languages.<sup>3</sup>

To start with, the theoretical basis of the present study will be given and an explanation for its motivation will be put forward. It is the follow-up of a previous study initiated some months ago by a member of the research group known as FRAC (reader reception: an analysis of reader intertext components) at the University of Barcelona. Next, the main protagonists of this study, the Triplets themselves, as well as their work will be introduced. In the third section, the study carried out on 170 children to find out about their literary and audio-visual preferences will be described and analysed, as well as the questionnaire used in this exercise. Finally, the results and conclusions of the investigation will be exposed and further aims of research proposed. After the bibliography, an appendix has been added to include some relevant information, such as a sample questionnaire and a summary of the most outstanding data obtained in the different questions.

## 1. Research Theory Based on Literary and Media Coordinates

To open a theoretical investigation with a title as presumptuous and extensive as the one chosen here may seem to denote an excess of ambition on the part of the investigator. Nevertheless, discarding presumptuousness from the outstart, we must clarify that the reason for the heading of the first part of the paper "Research theory based on literary and media coordinates" is due to the theoretical complexity underlying the topic under investigation: the reception of literary characters who have become media phenomena, and the gender impact

<sup>2</sup> Let us think, for example, of some advertisements that have been fined and withdrawn from the market (lately, one by Dolce & Gabbana 2007, for instance).

<sup>3</sup> *The Triplets* web site: <<http://www.thetriplets.com/>>.

on eight-year-old children through the feminine models they embody. It becomes clear, then, that children's literature and media reception sustain the theoretical basis of this study and justify this section's heading.

We chose to carry out this investigation to continue a previous study initiated with a professor at the Department of Language and Literature at the University of Barcelona, Dr. Prats<sup>4</sup>, on the representation of the feminine models displayed in *The Triplets*. We both cooperate in the research group FRAC, at the same university. After consulting specific bibliography on gender treatment in Spanish juvenile literature from the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we decided to investigate if *The Triplets* followed the line of feminine role transformation initiated around the seventies and eighties in our country or, on the contrary, if it remained anchored in the sexist inequality that dominates a major part of the universal tradition of fantasy literature. Bibliographical sources consulted on the subject – Turin (1994), Cromer & Turin (1998), Molina (1996) and Colomer (1999) – agreed that both on a visual and at a textual level, masculine and feminine roles are portrayed differently. While masculine role characters are bestowed with intelligence and industrious natures, feminine ones are portrayed as ignorant and reduced to familiar and domestic contexts.

The conclusion of the previous study was that *The Triplets* started out with a characteristically “female” role and then suffered gender transformation. This process began in the written tales and became consolidated in their audio-visual counterparts. To reach these conclusions, a chart was designed with the information obtained from the theoretical corpus. It was divided into five topics: scenarios, clothing/complements, roles, virtues/attitudes and actions that seemed to be the most persistent in children's stories and tales. Within each topic, between five and seven aspects were chosen for analysis in as many as six collections of *The Triplets*, ranging from the first story, in which the three characters were born (1983), to comics written for the audio-visual script (1995). For a better understanding, a brief visual summary was drawn up (see figure 2 in section 2) which shows the story on which the cartoons series was based. It then shows the books that were written as a result of the audiovisual series' scripts.

An analysis and a comparison of each individual topic showed significant changes in the following three topics: roles, virtues/attitudes and the actions the children performed. For that reason, the article ended up sustaining that *The Triplets* contribute to a new feminine model in children literature that culminates and consolidates that of the cartoons. According to Fedorov (2008), the series turn the Triplets into media characters simply because they appear repeatedly in a media context.

Despite coincidences between the 1985 collection and the cartoons, the most surprising changes between the illustrations and texts in the books and those in the cartoons are the girls' physical appearance and maturation, as well as their clothes and complements. The image displayed by the cartoon Triplets corresponds to girls of five or six years of age, whereas their mentality and intelligence is equivalent to those of seven or eight year-olds. The girls seem to be younger when seen on the screen. Clothes and complements also vary.

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<sup>4</sup>The article mentioned is “The Triplets and the representation of feminine models”, Prats & Ambròs (2007).

Whereas in the tales they wear varied clothing (dresses, skirts, sports clothes, etc.), on TV they usually appear in blue dungarees and t-shirts matching the colour of the little ribbon that identifies them.

From both a literary and a media-orientated point of view, it can be sustained that the cultural transmission of roles, models, conducts and ideas is inherent to the act of communicating, whichever support is the one chosen. Nevertheless, with the appearance of mass media, a concern for the effects caused by the media is born. Many useful studies on such influences and effects sustain Echo's (1965) apocalyptic and integrating point of view, as well as extending the debate. Examples of this are Postman's (1983) and Tapscott's (1998) opposite views. Mc Quail (2000, p. 426) exposes three different types of effects: cognitive, affective and behavioural. On this basis, he designs a chart in which he considers all the possible media effects by combining two variables: intentionality and response time of the broadcaster emitter.

From an educational point of view, Wolf (1992–1994) adds that the impact of media depends on other variables such as student reception, interaction with other media and child cognitive development. Strasburger & Wilson (2002) reviewed media impact on both children and young people. In an eight-chapter book/paper, they went into monographic studies on media violence, sexuality and the media, drugs and the media, eating and eating disorders and rock music and musical videos. They insist on the idea that media messages are interpreted differently according to the age of the viewers. Such studies explain the five mental processes children activate: information selection for processing; sequencing of major events/actions into some kind of story; drawing inferences from implicit cues in messages; drawing sense out of both explicit and implicit cues in messages; and message evaluation resulting in liking or disliking it.

To conclude this synthetic and incomplete review of the theories on the effects of communication<sup>5</sup>, it is clear that the mass media have an impact on the audience and that the meanings and interpretations of society are a collective phenomenon. Consequently, the more contact we have with the media, the more mediatized the representations of the complex physical and social world in which we live are. Following Rubin and Haridakis' (2001) latest research on media effects, my study provides an insight into the portraits and stereotypes of women in the media, in this case through *The Triplets*, as well as their reception and impact on eight-year-olds.

In the title of this paper the term 'reception' is used. It is understood as the ability to read both images and texts as a "gestalt", being aware that, as stated by Duran (2007), "[...] any text and any image, any book and especially a picture book, becomes a representation for the reader. [...] It occurs to me that maybe there are not any big differences between the processes which are activated in our mind when we are in front of a text and those processes which are activated when we are in front of an image. Even in those processes which are activated when

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<sup>5</sup> For a fully detailed and referenced study see Ambròs (2002), sections 1.2.4. and 1.2.5 in chapter one: <<http://www.tdx.cesca.es/TDX-0902104-103903/>>.

we are not in front of a text or a static image, but sitting and watching a theatre play or a television show". Which is the mental representation boys and girls have of the study as regards the roles and character of the Triplets? In the third section, after getting to know *The Triplets*, the answer to this question will be revealed.

## 2. *The Triplets*: Three Filmstars

In 1983, Barcelona-born writer Roser Capdevila created *The Triplets*, three little hand-drawn girls. Since then, Annie, Tessa and Nellie have become media characters for children in Catalonia and throughout the World. Inspired by her three daughters, Roser Capdevila illustrated their adventures and stories in different series and collections. Two years after their creation, *The Triplets* were joined by a new character that helped them enter the world of fiction and magic: the Bored Witch. A new collection of rewritten classical and fantastic stories was to be created. It is fair to say that the stories soon became highly popular, being published in many countries since then.

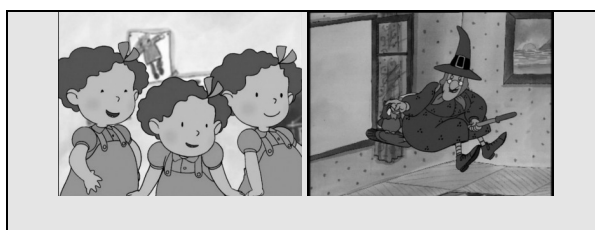


Fig.1: *The Triplets and the Bored Witch*

Likewise, collections of illustrated stories have been coming out in different series, languages and formats. Since 1983, the sisters have been the “narrators” of traditional and fantastic tales, author biographies, etc. In 1994, a Catalan production company, Cromosoma, began a co-production of television series with the Catalan Television (Televisió de Catalunya). After great success in the first 13 episodes, production increased to a total of 104 episodes. A brief synopsis of each title can be found on their web site. It should also significant *The Triplets* have been translated into 35 different languages. They can be seen on TV in 158 countries and are one of the longest-running cartoon series in Europe.

The narrative structure of the stories, as from 1988, and in the cartoons is exactly the same: The Triplets appear in a real environments as in school, at home, in the street, at grandmother’s house, etc. They misbehave in some way and the Bored Witch appears. She punishes the Triplets by “trapping” them and projecting them into some of the world’s most popular fantastic tales. They normally land at the moment the story is coming to a climax and bring about a happy ending. In the end, the sisters are able to solve the story and sent back home having tricked the Bored Witch in some way. The story ends within twenty-six minutes. *The Triplets* normally respect the structure of well-known stories although they

introduce variations to the plot. Some of the new scripts are inspired in Rodari's work. They result in modern and with it stories. The girls usually star in the stories alongside other actors and help to solve the ongoing conflicts.

I personally agree with Lluçh's assertion (1999, p. 6) that the early Triplets (1983) book collection displayed successful TV patterns: referential situations and characters as well as changing secondary characters; an open-ended question, stepped in motivation, at the conclusion. Lluçh also adds another interesting idea: cartoons based on the 1985 collection make loop-like variations. They consist of a variation on the series with a flash-back structure where the episodes maintain the prototype without advancing in time.

Figure 2 shows the brief visual summary mentioned before. It shows the differences between the work that inspired the cartoon series and the later collections.

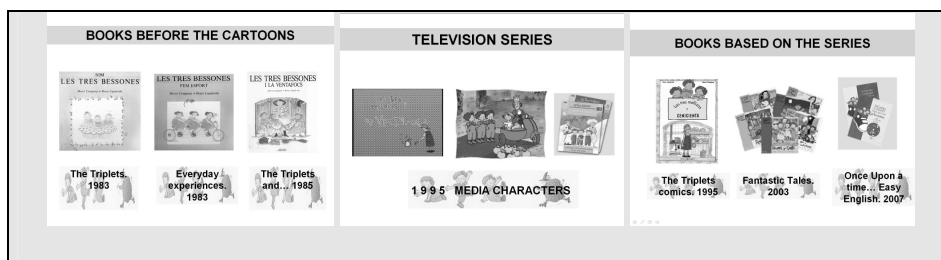


Fig. 2: Brief visual summary: from books to television screen

This section concludes with two reflections. At present, *The Triplets* have generated a vast production that includes collections, DVDs, a web site, games, clothes, etc. This merchandising has not only become one third of the company's income (Aymerich 2007), but has culminated in the creation of a media product. The media characters have been used to promote a great number of social activities, civic events, awards, etc.<sup>6</sup> This has reinforced a brand that sells intrinsically sound products. In this sense, Lluçh (2007) traces the transformation of an author or a story (in the field of juvenile literature) into a make or media symbol. The same concept can be applied to the phenomenon of *The Triplets'* since they belong to the

<sup>6</sup> In 2002, *The Triplets* present the famous architect Gaudí. A book and a DVD are published.

In 2003 they participated in multiple civic events and campaigns, for example "Together for Africa", organised by the Red Cross, Intermón Oxfam and Médecins Sans Frontières. It aims to collect the last peseta coins in order to invest them in humanitarian projects in Africa. In 1998 the triplets also cooperate on campaigns launched by the Generalitat of Catalonia Directorate-General for Civic Action, helping to promote children's rights. A campaign was recently presented by the Catalan Traffic Service in which the Triplets teach young children about the Highway Code.

In 2004 *The Triplets* participated in the Barcelona Forum with different actions as the reissue of three titles of the collection "A look at the world", that have been distributed to schools, the creation of a board game and the participation of storytellers.

cultural world of children. Paraphrasing Corea (2004), children are no longer “useless receivers of education”, but potential consumers in an phenomenon where merchandising acts as a cohesive agent.

The last reflection revolves around social and educational activities and campaigns in which *The Triplets* took an important part. *The Triplets* talked about Gaudí and they were also in the Barcelona Forum. The latest example is that the sisters have been chosen by the Catalan government to make the country known to other children. The documentary called *Les Tres Bessones i Catalunya Real* (The Triplets and Catalonia) has received some criticism because of the representation of Catalan society. Under this backdrop, the study concludes that *The Triplets* have turned into the current Catalan media storytellers and culture-spinnersitters because their reception and impact on children is considered to be positive due to the roles and values they exhibit. However, from an educational point of view, a critical analysis of the media characters is also necessary and cannot be left out.

### 3. Study of *The Triplets*' Reception

One of the targets set out in this study was to contrast the results found in previous bibliographical and theoretical research with the opinion of boys and girls in Catalonia. Ideally, information would have been obtained from boys and girls in different autonomous regions, and even different countries. But professional as well as personal obligations forced us to restrict the selected sample to 170 children we interviewed in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. A fully detailed description follows on the investigation we designed and carried out.

#### 3.1. The Questionnaire

The research typology that best suited the kind of information we wanted was selective. By using it, information could be gathered through a questionnaire with fourteen questions specially drawn up for children who had just finished the first cycle of primary education. At the end of June 2007, the questionnaire was prepared and contacts were made with schools and teachers who accepted to cooperate with us by distributing the questionnaires to their pupils. We wish to press our gratitude for the efficiency and cooperation received from seven such schools, especially as regards the teachers and pupils involved. They all fulfilled the protocols designed for the occasion in order to obtain the maximum reliability in data collection. Thanks to all of them and to their good predisposition the results obtained can be shown and the investigation carried out.

Several variables were taken into account when selecting the sample. In order to obtain as wide as possible a range, children from different cities and towns near Barcelona were chosen. We also selected children from different social backgrounds and neighbourhoods. Schools and percentage of interviewees from the different schools are shown in figure 3. All added together to give a balanced sample of 85 boys and 85 girls. This balance between boys and girls fulfilled another important variable in the investigation.

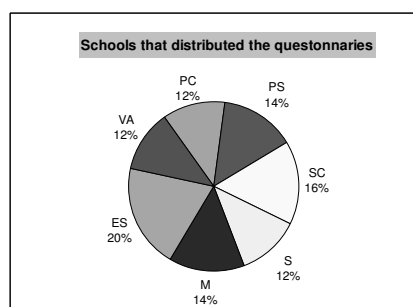


Fig.3: The seven schools that answered the questionnaire

The main reasons for choosing informants who had just initiated their third year of primary education (children between 7 and 8 years of age) are as follows. First of all, at this educational level children are competent in reading and do so on their own; secondly, they are mature enough to master abstraction, easily making connections when answering questions; and thirdly, at this age, elementary pupils have particular strategies which differ from those of elder elementary school children, teenagers and adults when responding to media messages and when distinguishing reality from fiction (Strasburger & Wilson 2002, p. 31). In spite of the “pros”, we were aware of the “cons” that existed in this age group. Some children told us, *The Triplets* were not an object of their current interest, as the results obtained later confirmed. This was especially true of the boys. In the end, the risk was taken and we went ahead with this age group.

On the second day of the 2007–08 school year, a blueprint questionnaire was distributed to a group of thirty children in their third year of primary school. Some of the questions were found to need rewriting to be better understood. Consequently, the first version was modified and a final questionnaire obtained (see the questionnaire and a summary of the results in Appendix I).

The questionnaire was based on four topics (see table 1), which respond to the questions covered in this paper. In the right hand column appear the questions corresponding to each topic. They demand alternate “Open” and “Closed” responses. Letter (C), at the beginning, stands for a “Closed”-type question and (O) indicates Open ones. The criteria for designing the questions in the questionnaire was based on the bibliography consulted in works previous to Prats & Ambròs (2007), especially in two studies carried out by the Association Européenne Du Côte Des filles (1998).



Topics	Questions in the questionnaire
<p>I. Tales Find out the children's favourite tales and whether they know <i>The Triplets'</i> books.</p>	<p>(O) 1. Name your favourite tale. (C) 2. Have you ever read tales of <i>The Triplets'</i>?</p>
<p>II. Cartoons Find out children's favourite cartoons and why.</p>	<p>(O) 3. Which are your favourite cartoons? (O) 4. Why do you like these cartoons?</p>
<p>III. <i>The Triplets</i> Find out how much the children know about each Triplet, their preferences and intertextual relation with other fictional characters and compare this with the Bored Witch.</p>	<p>(C) 5. Tick how many times a week you watch <i>The Triplets</i>. (O) 6. Name your two favourite episodes of <i>The Triplets</i>. (C) 7. Annie, Tessa and Nellie are amusing triplets. Read these words (greedy, bossy, shy, daring, playful, friendly, smart and romantic) and choose the ones that best describe each of them. You can use them more than once. (O) 8. If you could become one of <i>The Triplets</i>, which one would you choose to be? (O) 9. The Bored Witch is one of the characters in the series. Choose the word that best describes her. (C) 10. Name characters from other stories, tales or films who remind you of each triplet as well as the Bored Witch by the way they behave. (O) 14. To finish off: If you had magic like the Bored Witch, what would you change in <i>The Triplets'</i>?</p>
<p>IV. Merchandising of the media product State the possession of <i>The Triplet's</i> products as well as their knowledge of the web side.</p>	<p>(C) 11. Have you got clothes, folders, school bags, puzzles or computer games on which <i>The Triplets</i> are displayed? (C) 12. Who gave them to you? (C) 13. Have you ever visited <i>The Triplets</i> web site?</p>

Table 1: Topics and questions in the questionnaire

### 3.2. Data Interpretation and Analysis

An Excel spreadsheet was used to analyse the 170 questionnaires. It contained all the information gathered which was previously codified to distinguish whether the answers belonged to an “open” or “closed” response. In the case of the closed answers it was an easy task. On the other hand, for the six open questions, data interpretation and codification was much more laborious and time-consuming because a series of alternative closed responses for every question had been established. Following Anguera’s advice (1994), a self-made coding system was used to categorize and codify opened questions. The most representative “closed” responses to codify “open” answers are to be found in the questionnaire in Appendix I. Children’s creativity in some responses, such as in questions 4 and 14 is surprising and indeed broke our initial expectations.

The questionnaire in the annex shows that the results obtained are classified according to whether the informants are boys or girls, since, as Strasburger and Wilson affirm “Research consistently shows sex differences among children too” (2002, p. 13), at cognitive, maturative and educational levels. To be consistent with the conclusions found in Prats & Ambròs (2007), it seemed appropriate to analyse the results from different points of view: the masculine and the feminine. In the present investigation, the sex of the informants has a direct effect on both the opinion and the reception of some questions, especially those in the third topic, *The Triplets*.

The data was analysed using a comparison of rates<sup>7</sup> to describe the differences between boys and girls. In the questionnaire in Appendix I, a column indicating the comparison of proportions was added next to the total amount of the children’s responses. The acronyms used to reveal the results are the following: “R” indicates that the difference between sexes is relevant; “SR” indicates that the difference between sexes is substantially relevant; and “—” means that no differences between boys and girls exist.

The results unfold from the questions in the questionnaire follow. Topic I deals with highly popular children’s literature. It is first on the list and no differences between boys and girls are shown. It must be said that 63.53 % of the boys and girls have read some story of *The Triplets*. Girls had read them the most, making a substantial difference with regard to the boys. Folk tales and stories based on animated cartoons or films are in second position and they exhibit relevant differences between both sexes.

Collecting data on children cartoon preferences is another issue raised in topic I. Answers to question number 3 were varied and needed subcategorising for coding purposes. At a first glance, it stands out that *The Triplets* are not among their preferred cartoons, since boys and girls alike cited programmes on private digital channels. We consider it necessary to comprise them under one heading because they were enclosed separately because not all the children

<sup>7</sup> The formula to calculate the comparison of rates is this one:

$$Z = \frac{\hat{p}_1 - \hat{p}_2}{\sqrt{\frac{\hat{p}(1-\hat{p})}{n_1} + \frac{\hat{p}(1-\hat{p})}{n_2}}}$$

have access to pay channels. A sample of the most cited ones are: *Disney Channel*, *Rantaro*, *Naruto*, etc.

Children's favourite cartoons on non-pay private and public channels are the *Simpsons*<sup>8</sup> in the first place, followed close behind by *Doraemon*, *Shin Chan*, *Inuyasha* and *Pokemon*. The latter shows a substantially relevant difference between girls and boys. Curiously enough, 75 % of the cartoons cited are of Japanese origin and in addition, the rest are broadcast on private non-pay television channels with the exception of *Inuyasha*. It was surprising to find that out because a study of children's programmes on all Spanish channels revealed that the channels that offered the most children's programmes were the Catalan channels TV3 and K33, which broadcast *Inuyasha*.

Boys and girls coincided in that they liked the cartoons because they made them laugh and were amusing, motives which coincide with two of the initial functions television had: to entertain and make audiences enjoy themselves. Television aims to entertain and amuse viewers. After describing the results obtained on the stories and cartoons, it is time to focus on the following topic: *The Triplets*.

Despite the wide offer of cartoons available, 64.7 % of the questioned children, with no sex distinction, claimed to watch *The Triplets* every week. In contrast, 35.4 % never did so. It is relevant to see the difference between boys and girls who never watch cartoons. This difference also becomes visible in question number 6, where children were asked to name the title of their favourite episode. In some cases, a blank answer could be justified because the children did not recall the title. In other cases, it became clear the children did not wish to answer. Boys and girls knew they were free to answer the questions in the questionnaire. Among the most quoted episodes, "The Triplets and King Kong" stands out. Boys and girls alike coincided. Other episodes that mark some relevant sex difference are *The Mermaid* and *Gaudí's Studio* because in both cases girls are the ones that chose these episodes and there is a clear difference. (See the Annex for answers to question 6 of the questionnaire).

In Prats & Ambròs (2007), the 104 DVD of the Triplets series were analysed and classified into five topics to find out the themes the Triplets covered. The topics are folklore, author's work, informative books, classical mythology, and biographies of famous people. The data obtained showed that nearly half the production, 46 %, belonged to the area of folk stories. Curiously enough, the "King Kong" episode belonged to the topic of informative stories, which was 7.7 % of the total production. This episode was thoroughly analysed and it was seen that not only does it break the archetypal structure of the Triplets stories, but also exhibits a frantic development of the action and media focus caused by the arrival of King Kong in Barcelona, the city where the gorilla Snowflake (Floquet de Neu) lives.

Although the Triples act as a team, they also have some individual traits. Question number 7 asked children to match a list of virtues with each triplet. The answers given by boys and girls

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<sup>8</sup> *The Simpsons*, *Doraemon* and *Shin Chan* are on Antena3, and *Pokemon* on Tele5, two private non-payment channels. During the week, *The Simpsons* is on at two o'clock. At weekends, it is on twice daily: at midday and in the evening. *Inuyasha* is the only programme displayed on a public channel, the one which has the widest range of children's cartoons.

are substantially different because nearly 23 % of boys did not answer. Most children agree Annie is romantic, daring and friendly. Tessa is considered smart, daring and shy. This contradiction shows an unclear reception of her character by boys and girls alike. Finally, Nellie, the greediest, was catalogued by boys and girls as playful and friendly, too.

When asked to identify themselves with one of the Triplets, 75 % of the boys show no wish to be identified with any of them. This might be due to the reason that boys are used to encounter smart male heroes in books, cartoons, television, etc., but not female ones. Most girls chose Annie, the romantic triplet, followed by Nellie and Tessa. In this question, differences between boys' and girls' answers are substantially different. This fact confirms that some boys still identify male stereotypes in the role of heroes. On the other hand, the Bored Witch's traits are very well described by boys and girls. She is magical, bored and half wicked/half kind according to the opinion of most children.

One of the most difficult parts of the questionnaire was question number 10. In the protocol designed to answer the questionnaires we had anticipated this to the teachers. The question was designed bearing in mind Buckingham's statement "intertextuality has become a dominant feature in contemporary media: texts repeatedly refer to other texts, or make use of them ironically" (2003, p. 57). The aim of the question was to see the correlation children could actually establish between *The Triplets* and other male and female characters in stories and television. Coding was a difficult task. Hence, five subcategories were introduced for better data collection.

The question required such a high degree of abstraction that 55.9 % of children did not want to answer it. In spite of this, two generalised associations were described. Firstly, most children associate *The Triplets* with known and nearby people, except for the Bored Witch. Secondly, girls always compare the Triplets and the Bored Witch with a female character from cartoons, television series or films. On the other hand, boys always compare the Triplets and the Bored Witch with male characters from cartoons, television series or films. These responses show all four female characters were associated in accordance with the sex of the informants.

The last question asked what children liked and disliked about the sisters. Unlike girls, boys wrote some nonsense expressions. Some girls responded they liked everything about the Triplets. Others responded they would change their clothes (type and colour) hair and face. More girls had negative perceptions of the younger image the Triplets took on when the cartoons series was created in 1994. Finally, it must be said that 21 % of the boys literally replied "we would turn them into boys". This expression shows discontent which is reinforced by a total of 33.3 % who answered the question using nonsense expressions.

Merchandising is the last topic to be mentioned before ending the description of the results. *The Triplet's* products are consumed by 59 % of the children we questioned. There are substantial differences according to the sex of the interviewee. Girls own more products because their parents or family bought them. Only 27 % of the boys and girls have ever visited *The Triples* web page.

#### 4. Conclusions

Once the results obtained have been commented, it is time to put forward the final conclusions and to respond to the key question in this research: How are the media characters *The Triplets* received? The statements that follow must be taken with caution and must at all times be understood within the context described. Hence, generalizations should not be extrapolated.

The boys and girls agree that their favourite children books are popular and highly productive children's literature stories. When choosing their favourite animated cartoons and justifying their choice, differences among sexes could not be observed. Most informants prefer cartoons on digital channels. In second place are *The Simpsons*, even though their subject matter and ironic nature are unsuitable for eight-year-olds. This strongly suggests that children increasingly choose the programmes they for free. In turn, childhood in boys and girls is changing, as argued by Tapscott (1998), Buckingham (2003), Strasburger & Wilson (2002) and Corea (2004).

A total of 64.7 % of the children watch *The Triplets* weekly, and the favourite episode among boys and girls alike is "The Triplets and King Kong", an episode which is quite different to the rest. When attributing virtues to the sisters, there are relevant differences between sexes, especially because some children did not answer the question. Boys and girls have correctly identified a virtue in each sister – Annie is romantic, Tessa is bossy and Nelly is greedy – although some children were hesitant. However, common virtues such as being smart, amusing or playful, which certainly move away from the female model found in traditional children's literature, have not been attributed to *The Triplets*. This leads us to affirm that girls' reception of some of the qualities the new female models which *The Triplets* exhibit, is slightly higher than the boys' counterpart. Boys do not wish to be identified with any of the three. Differences between girls' and boys' identification with the characters in *The Triplets* are substantially relevant in all cases.

No hesitations are found when pinpointing traits to the Bored Witch. Most children agree on her attributes. Nevertheless, when asked to associate her to characters in other texts, girls match her with female media characters and boys with male media ones. This is surprising, since both in tradition and in the media, witches outnumber sorcerers.

Intertextualities<sup>9</sup> of each sister with other male and female characters in the literary and media world confirm that relations are established mostly in the media field and not in the literary one. Also, direct correlations are established between the sex of the informant and the sex of the chosen character. That is to say, girls mostly quote female characters and boys male ones.

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<sup>9</sup> Intertextuality is "[...] the relationship that different literary elements have between them. Each element is related to prior ones, and this gives rise to intertextual or dialogical relationships" (Mendoza 1994, p. 24). In the voice of Genette (1982, p. 7 quoted in Mendoza 1994), intertextuality is "the relation of copresence between two or more texts, or the effective presence of one text within another". After these definitions it must be underlined that the concept of intertextuality may be applied to any type of text, not only literary ones, but also to visual and audiovisual ones.

It becomes obvious that virtual children's minds (Monereo 2005) belong to and associate with the screens and media and audiovisual world. In the net generation and society of information (Castells 2003), these constantly changing screens must be considered to be interactive informational nodes where a subject is no longer a traceable inscription but rather a new node in the network (Corea 2004, p. 115).

It is principally the girls who negatively perceived the younger image of *The Triplets* when the cartoon series was created in 1994 (Prats & Ambròs 2007), as visible in their clothes (type and colour), their hair and face. The audiovisual boom the series underwent in the nineties consolidated soon after thanks to merchandising campaigns. Their success continues, although perhaps less intensely. Girls consume their products the most. It can be assured that *The Triplets* have become a make.

The final conclusion to which we come in this study is that the role and gender change *The Triplets* exhibit, as argued in our previous work, is not received in the same way by the children who took part in the study. On the contrary, the sex of the interviewee determines relevant differences between the responses given. Some boys show certain discontent with the sex of the three sisters, and this attitude indicates these boys have understood neither the role change nor the virtues that *The Triplets* embody. In fact, we cannot overlook the fact that masculine stereotypes are still present in commercials, cartoons, movies, families, folk work, etc. Likewise, very little children's literature is to be found exhibiting girls as smart, entertaining or brave protagonists. On the other hand, both sexes agree as to their favourite children stories and cartoons.

Screens have become social agents for boys and girls to learn, feel and behave. Words, images and sounds do not convey gender equality. Consequently, further efforts need to be made to foster gender equality in the world of children. Furthermore, Spanish schools and government must seriously consider introducing media literacy in primary and secondary schools (Ambròs 2006, p. 166). There are European projects (i.e. audiovisual and media policies from the European Union and The European Charter for Media Literacy) already working on media literacy and in some countries media literacy has been introduced to the syllabus (Fedorov 2008, p. 19). Institutions as well as other civic associations and platforms<sup>10</sup> are making joint efforts to improve Bob MacCannon's vision: "Media literacy is young, research is incomplete, and agreement is sporadic. Nonetheless, the movement is flourishing" (2002, p. 323). Consequently, "society and education must reflect upon audiovisual culture and promote media narrative critical thinking in classrooms" (Ambròs & Breu 2007, p. 29).

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<sup>10</sup> Aulamedia is a Catalan example: <http://www.aulamedia.org/english>.

## Appendix I

A summary of the results obtained by the questionnaires answered by 85 girls and 85 boys in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of primary school in September 2007.

### Children's ages:

Ages	GIRLS	BOYS	TOTAL
8 years	64	65	129
7 years	18	15	33
No answer	3	5	8

### 1. Name your favourite tale.

Favourite tales	GIRLS	BOYS	TOTAL	CR
Traditional tales	20	34	54	<b>R</b>
Comic	5	12	17	<b>R</b>
Children's literature	42	34	76	—
Author books	3	6	9	—
Topic book	7	3	10	—
Film or cartoon adaptation	7	15	22	<b>R</b>

### 2. Have you ever read books of *The Triplets*?

ANSWERS	GIRLS	BOYS	TOTAL	CR
Yes	68	40	108	<b>SR</b>
No	17	45	62	<b>SR</b>

**3. What are your favourite cartoons? Write down two titles.**

Most children answered	GIRLS	BOYS	TOTAL	CR
From a particular public television channel K3/ Canal 33	5	4	9	—
From the digital pay channel	21	24	45	—
They name non-cartoon children's films	2	4	6	—
They name children's cartoon films	5	5	10	—
No answer'	0	1	1	—
They name youth or adult TV series	1	1	2	—
The Simpsons	24	18	42	—
Doraemon	18	10	28	<b>R</b>
Shin Chan	14	12	26	—
Inuyasha	11	12	23	—
Pokemon	1	13	14	<b>SR</b>

**4. Why do you like these cartoons?**

Most children answered	GIRLS	BOYS	TOTAL	CR
Because they are fun and make me laugh	54	54	108	—
Because they are interesting and I like them	13	6	19	<b>R</b>
Because there is fighting in them	0	9	9	<b>SR</b>
Because incredible things happen in them	5	8	13	—
No answer	7	7	14	—

**5. Tick how many times a week you watch *The Triplets*.**

ANSWERS	GIRLS	BOYS	TOTAL	CR
5 or 6 days	12	5	17	—
3 or 4	2	1	3	—
2	6	4	10	—
Occasionally	48	33	81	—
Never	17	42	59	<b>SR</b>



**6. Name your two favourite episodes of *The Triplets*.**

Most children answered	GIRLS	BOYS	TOTAL	CR
Non relevant answer	7	4	11	—
No answer	27	44	71	<b>SR</b>
King Kong	10	14	24	—
The little Mermaid	7	2	9	<b>R</b>
Robinson Crusoe	0	5	5	—
Gaudi's studio	7	0	7	<b>SR</b>
The three little pigs	0	4	4	—

**7. Annie, Tessa and Nellie are amusing triplets. Read these words (greedy, bossy, shy, daring, playful, friendly, smart and romantic) and choose the ones that best describe each of them. You can use them more than once.**

Most children answered	GIRLS	BOYS	TOTAL	CR
<b>Annie (blue ribbon)</b>				
No answer	13	30	43	<b>SR</b>
Romantic	24	14	38	<b>R</b>
Daring	21	14	35	—
Friendly	19	8	27	<b>SR</b>
Bossy	14	18	32	—
<b>Tessa (pink ribbon)</b>				
No answer	9	30	39	<b>SR</b>
Smart	25	12	37	<b>SR</b>
Bossy	17	8	25	<b>R</b>
Shy	18	12	30	—
Daring	14	16	30	—
<b>Nellie (green ribbon)</b>				
No answer	9	29	38	<b>SR</b>
Greedy	46	35	81	—
Playful	18	9	27	<b>R</b>
Friendly	12	12	24	—
Smart	12	7	19	—

8. If you could become one of The Triplets, which one would you choose to be?

ANSWERS	GIRLS	BOYS	TOTAL	CR
Annie	30	9	39	<b>SR</b>
Tessa	15	5	20	<b>SR</b>
Nellie	18	4	22	<b>SR</b>
None of them	17	64	81	<b>SR</b>
All of them	4	1	5	<b>R</b>
No answer	1	2	3	—

9. The Bored Witch is one of the characters in the series. Choose the word that best describes her.

ANSWERS	GIRLS	BOYS	TOTAL	CR
Wicked	38	37	75	—
Kind hearted	2	2	4	—
Boring	59	63	122	—
Magic	61	62	123	—
Fun	30	29	59	—
Half wicked and half kind	54	43	97	—
Shy	4	11	15	<b>R</b>
No answer	3	5	8	—

**10. Name characters from other stories, tales or films which remind you of each triplet as well as the Bored Witch by the way they behave.**

<b>Most children answered</b>	<b>GIRLS</b>	<b>BOYS</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>CR</b>
No answer	40	55	95	<b>SR</b>
<b>Annie</b>				
They associate her with friends and relatives.	12	6	18	—
They associate her with female characters from cartoons, television series or films.	12	4	16	<b>R</b>
They associate her with male characters from cartoons, television series or films.	8	9	17	—
They associate her with female characters from tales.	5	1	6	<b>R</b>
They associate her with male characters from tales.	2	1	3	—
<b>Tessa</b>				
They associate her with friends and relatives.	11	8	19	—
They associate her with female characters from cartoons, television series or films.	14	3	17	—
They associate her with male characters from cartoons, television series or films.	8	9	17	—
They associate her with female characters from tales.	5	1	6	<b>R</b>
They associate her with male characters from tales.	1	2	3	—
<b>Nellie</b>				
They associate her with friends and relatives.	17	7	24	<b>R</b>
They associate her with female characters from cartoons, television series or films.	9	3	12	<b>R</b>
They associate her with male characters from cartoons, television series or films.	4	9	13	—
They associate her with female characters from tales.	3	0	3	—
They associate her with male characters from tales.	3	2	5	—
<b>Bored Witch</b>				
They associate her with friends and relatives.	8	4	12	—
They associate her with female characters from cartoons, television series or films.	11	2	13	<b>SR</b>
They associate her with male characters from cartoons, television series or films.	5	12	17	<b>R</b>
They associate her with female characters from tales.	3	0	3	—
They associate her with male characters from tales.	4	1	5	—

**11. Have you got clothes, folders, school bags, puzzles or computer games where *The Triplets* are displayed?**

ANSWERS	GIRLS	BOYS	TOTAL	CR
Yes	61	39	100	<b>SR</b>
No	21	41	62	<b>SR</b>
No answer	3	5	8	—

**12. Who gave them to you?**

ANSWERS	GIRLS	BOYS	TOTAL	CR
Parents	28	17	45	<b>R</b>
Relatives	19	6	25	<b>SR</b>
Friends	9	4	13	—
Others	8	8	16	—
No answer	21	50	71	<b>SR</b>

**13. Have you ever visited *The Triplets* web site?**

ANSWERS	GIRLS	BOYS	TOTAL	CR
Yes	26	22	46	—
No	57	63	120	—
No answer	2	0	2	—

**14. To finish off. If you had magic like the Bored Witch, what would you change in *The Triplets*?**

ANSWERS	GIRLS	BOYS	TOTAL	CR
Nothing? Anything	18	6	24	<b>SR</b>
Everything	7	4	11	—
Nonsense expressions	9	25	34	<b>SR</b>
The hair and face	15	6	21	<b>R</b>
The clothes or its colour	20	5	25	<b>SR</b>
Turn them into boys	0	16	16	<b>SR</b>
The personality in one of them	2	2	4	—
No answer	10	10	20	—

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