

# James Joyce in Catalonia at the End of the 20th Century: High Culture and Popular Culture

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## *Abstract*

This article asserts that James Joyce remained a figure of reference for the Catalan public, in high culture and popular culture alike, in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It argues its case by analysing two cultural manifestations centred on the writer, namely the exhibition *El Dublín de James Joyce*, which was held in the Barcelona Contemporary Culture Centre in 1995, and an episode of the successful Catalan sitcom *Plats bruts* entitled “Tinc poder.” The aim is to show that the two cultural products in question were unrelated to the rich Joycean tradition established in Catalonia in the 1920s.

**Keywords:** *Ulysses*, Barcelona, Dublin, exhibition, sitcom, high culture, popular culture.

“The pages of *Dubliners* reveal all the concerns, all the myths, all the sores of a great modern city.”  
Ignasi Armengou, *Ciutat* [Manresa], 1926

Situated in the historical Casa de la Caritat building, the Barcelona Contemporary Culture Centre (CCCB) was inaugurated in February 1994. Its first major literary project consisted of a series of exhibitions devoted to different writers and their respective cities. The first of those exhibitions was *El Dublín de James Joyce (James Joyce's Dublin)*, which ran from spring to autumn in 1995. It received many visitors and met with acclaim from the media. Featuring contributions from Juan Insúa, Morris Beja, Augustine Martin, Fritz Senn, Francisco García Tortosa and Joaquim Mallafrè, a magnificent catalogue on the novelist and Ireland's capital was published for the exhibition. Given the quality of its texts and illustrations, including many great photographs, the catalogue *El Dublín de James Joyce* can be undoubtedly considered one of the finest books on Joyce ever published in Catalonia.

Five years later, James Joyce was the focus of an episode entitled "Tinc poder" ("I have power") in season two of the successful television comedy series *Plats bruts (Dirty plates)*. Hugely popular, geared to a family audience and broadcast at peak viewing time, *Plats bruts* was a cultural product for the masses. One of the two storylines in "Tinc poder" revolved around a statement that one of the characters made at the beginning of the episode: "The world is divided into those who've read *Ulysses* and those who haven't." The main character and his friends are subsequently involved in a series of incidents based on their experience with the novel.

The fact that post-Olympic Barcelona's new culture centre made Joyce a flagship author for high culture and, five years later, the novelist was the focal point of an entire episode of a popular television comedy series shows that the legendary status of the writer, and of *Ulysses* in particular, not only remained very much intact at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also transcended high culture. Both cultural products, one corresponding to high culture and the other to popular culture, will be analysed in the coming pages, with a view to identifying the image of Joyce projected to the general public

in Catalonia as the millennium drew to a close, and to showing that, despite their being two further elements of Catalonia's longstanding Joycean tradition (which dates back to the 1920s), neither of them consciously sought to be part of that tradition, with the result that neither of them reaped the benefits of the cultural capital in question.

### **The exhibition *El Dublín de James Joyce***

In 1993, Argentine Juan Insúa accepted the task of designing an exhibition series entitled *Las ciudades y sus escritores* (*Cities and their writers*). He himself was curator of all the exhibitions. The literary project opened with *El Dublín de James Joyce* (9 May - 1 October 1995), an exhibition recognised with the FAD "Ephemeral Spaces" Award in 1996. The series continued with *Les Lisboes de Pessoa* (*The Lisbons of Pessoa*, 19 February - 1 June 1997), *La ciutat de K. Franz Kafka i Praga* (*The City of K. Franz Kafka and Prague*, 20 July - 10 October 1999) and *Cosmòpolis. Borges i Buenos Aires* (*Cosmopolis. Borges and Buenos Aires*, 29 October 2002 - 16 February 2003).<sup>1</sup>

The exhibition *El Dublín de James Joyce* featured images provided by a wide range of institutions from Europe (mainly Ireland) and America, including the Washington DC Library of Congress, Dublin Public Libraries, Princeton University Library, London's British Movietonews and the Library of Catalonia. The books exhibited for illustrative purposes came from the Zürich James Joyce Foundation, and from Carola Giedon-Welcker's bequest to that institution in particular. Much of the graphic material on display in the CCCB's halls was reproduced in the exhibition's book, which was also produced under the direction of Juan Insúa.

The exhibition was organised into three parts. Necropolis corresponded to *Dubliners*, Metropolis to *Ulysses*, and Heliopolis to *Finnegans Wake*. Against the backdrop of the exhibition, Bloomsday was celebrated on 16 June. In his report

for the newspaper *La Vanguardia*, entitled “Huevos, bacon, hígado y riñones” (“Eggs, bacon, liver and kidneys”), Xavi Ayén explained that the event involved a group of Joycean intellectuals replicating Leopold Bloom’s breakfast at 10 a.m. The participants included members of the Societat d’Estudis Literaris (the Literary Studies Society), among them its director, Jordi Llovet, and illustrious Joyceans such as José María Valverde (who translated some of Joyce’s works to Spanish) and Joaquim Mallafrè (who did likewise to Catalan). The reporter recorded not only the recollections of Valverde, who, along with Borges and Anthony Burgess, had attended the 1982 Bloomsday celebrations in Dublin, but also the journalist Brian McGarry’s opinion of Bloomsday in Dublin and the emphatic declarations of Jordi Llovet. Professor of comparative literature at the University of Barcelona, Llovet stated, “there is no relationship between Joyce and Barcelona, perhaps because Barcelona is a city that prizes Enlightenment values.” He argued that it was logical for Catalans to celebrate Bloomsday just as much as for Dubliners since “when a book has a translation like Mallafrè’s, it automatically becomes Catalan literature.” (Ayén 1995)

Weeks later, Llovet published a review of the exhibition in *La Vanguardia*. In addition to saying the event had “enormous value,” he praised Insúa’s scenographic design skills (applauding the “cardboard walls, urban mazes and replicas of Joycean taverns and homes”), and described it as “one of the most appealing ‘literary’ exhibitions ever staged in Barcelona.” He recognised, however, that “it is possible to have visited the exhibition and learned nothing of Joyce’s significance in the literary panorama of our Europe.” (Llovet 1995)

Llovet’s last statement was absolutely right. The exhibition’s visitors were not offered the slightest insight into Joyce’s impact on European culture and, more specifically, on Catalan culture. The exhibition failed to inform them that some of the first European translations of Joyce’s works were published in Barcelona; that in the first essay in Catalan on the novelist,

published in 1926, Ignasi Armengou emphasised that Joycean Dublin throbbed with the concerns, myths and sores of the modern city; or that the finest Catalan prose writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Josep Pla, published an eulogistic article on James Joyce—an author who had a fundamental influence on Pla’s great novel *El carrer Estret* (Iribarren, “Josep Pla i James Joyce”)—, on the front page of *La Publicitat*, a daily newspaper from Barcelona, on 19 February 1927. In the light of such evidence, it can be said that Llovet’s declarations at the Barcelona Bloomsday celebrations in 1995 were mistaken. It is not the case that there had been no relationship between Joyce and Barcelona. Studies on Joyce’s reception in Catalonia published years later, particularly in the monograph entitled

*The Reception of James Joyce in Europe*, attest to a rich Joycean tradition in Catalonia, dating back to the 1920s (Iribarren, “The Reception of James Joyce in Catalonia”; “James Joyce a Catalunya”). In contrast, that tradition was a feature of the exhibition (and catalogue) *Joyce y España* (*Joyce and Spain*), which ran from 10 June to 31 July 2004 in Madrid’s Círculo de Bellas Artes, and whose curator was Carlos García Santa Cecilia.

### **The catalogue *El Dublín de James Joyce***

The catalogue opened with two institutional texts, the first by Pasqual Maragall i Mira, mayor of Barcelona and chairman of the CCCB Consortium, and the second by Josep Ramoneda, director of the CCCB. In a brief foreword, Maragall said that Dublin was the central element of the novelist’s creative universe, particularly in *Ulysses*, which he described as a literary monument. His references to Catalan culture were limited to two people, Joaquim Mallafrè, whose “magnificent” Catalan translation of *Ulysses* he praised, and Joan Ramon Masoliver (specifically, his book *Perfil de sombras*), whom he recognised as Joyce’s interpreter. It could be inferred from Maragall’s text that Joyce’s status as early-twentieth-century

Dublin's great narrator justified selecting the novelist to inaugurate a series of exhibitions on cities and their writers, a series geared to understanding contemporary man.

Josep Ramoneda, meanwhile, emphasised that the fruitful tandem of writer and city was a first-rate literary phenomenon, consequently justifying the series of exhibitions the CCCB was to stage as an *experiment*. Ramoneda explained the aim behind the exhibition, which sought to use objects, images, music and words to capture the interrelationship between Joyce and Dublin; in other words, to construct the imaginary world of the city on the basis of the novelist's subjectivity.

The catalogue's collection of Joycean contributions comprised six texts. The first was "The Dublin of James Joyce. The urban comedy," by Juan Insúa; the second, "Joyceworld: Dublin and *Dubliners*," by Morris Beja; the third, "Joyce, *Portrait* and Dublin," by Augustine Martin; the fourth, "*Urbis inventio*. Joyce and his city," by Fritz Senn; the fifth, "Dublin and *Finnegans Wake*," by Francisco García Tortosa; and the sixth and last, "Dublin: the colours of a style," by Joaquim Mallafrè. Apart from Insúa, all the contributors are figures of renown in Joycean circles, due to their links with institutions devoted to the writer, their translations or their essays. Additionally, four of them are from the academic arena (Beja – Ohio State University; Martin – University College Dublin; García Tortosa – University of Seville; and Mallafrè – Rovira i Virgili University). The texts, written in Catalan and interspersed with numerous images, typographic plays and characters (which were intended to translate the complex, labyrinthine Joycean imaginary world, but at times hindered comprehension of the text), were followed by a brief biobibliography of the authors, a bibliography on Dublin, a chronological overview of Joyce's life and, finally, Spanish and English translations of the same texts.

The first four chapters of the catalogue had two things in common. Firstly, they prioritised developing a topography of

Dublin based on the Joycean texts. Secondly, they undertook their hermeneutic exercise from a delocalised perspective, i.e. without taking into account that most of the people who would visit the exhibition and read the catalogue (published in Catalan, it should not be forgotten, although with Spanish and English translations) would be from Catalonia. With singular rhetoric, Juan Insúa listed the different passages of text that referred to the city's physical space, and conferred a symbolic character upon that space. He thus conceived his text in three parts, an exact replica of the exhibition, interpreting that *Dubliners* would be identified with Necropolis, *Ulysses* with Metropolis, and *Finnegans Wake* with Heliopolis. Morris Beja ably summarised the complex relationship between Joyce and Dublin on the basis of biographical information and explained how the city was portrayed in *Dubliners*. He concluded that although Joyce had sought to make it very clear that *Dubliners* was in no way “a collection of tourist impressions” (Beja 245), by the late twentieth-century the novelist had become one of Dublin's foremost tourist attractions. Augustine Martin used *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to offer a sketch of Joyce's Dublin. His text was based on a documented historical analysis of a city experiencing political and religious conflict, with nationalist and separatist aspirations, and with tense rivalry between institutions and cultural groups, that being the city that Joyce knew and recreated. The Dublin depicted in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, according to Martin's attentive, enlightening text, was probably inspired by “the Cretan labyrinth created by [...] Dedalus” (Martin 248). Fritz Senn took the notion of Dublin and Joyce as an inseparable pair as his starting point and reconstructed the writer's view of the city on the basis of *Dubliners*, of certain chapters of *Ulysses*, using the itineraries of Stephen Dedalus and Bloom, and of *Finnegans Wake*. Senn affirmed that familiarity with the city enables readers to better understand *Ulysses*, and said that *Finnegans Wake* aimed to depict an archetype, “so that Dublin is to represent all cities (many of which are named).” (Senn 253)

Francisco García Tortosa and Joaquim Mallabrè, on the other hand, did take into account that most of the readers of the catalogue would be Catalan when conceiving their texts. García Tortosa set out an explanatory roadmap for negotiating the cryptic linguistic magma of *Finnegans Wake*, and skilfully connected with the native readership from the beginning of his text:

There is no doubt that the city impregnates most of the pages in the work, but it is a very different city to the real Dublin, as its outlines are drawn across a dreamlike backdrop and the dynamics of the language. An example is the best explanation of what I mean here: Barcelona, along with Madrid, Seville and Salamanca, are some of the cities mentioned in *Finnegans Wake*. To say that these cities appear in the book is already something of an interpretation, given that usually the name figures in a distorted form. In this way, Barcelona is surely to be found in words such as “*bracelonettes*” (273.18), “*braceoelanders*” (398.05) and “*barsalooner*” (625.11). In the first example, we have no great difficulty in seeing echoes of the city and even the Catalan diminutive [...]. In the other two cases, the identification with Barcelona is mere conjecture, though possible if we consider the heights of linguistic deformation reached in the book. (García Tortosa 254)

Professor García Tortosa continued his discourse with an entomological exercise in etymological flow and the identification of the devilish linguistic plays in *Finnegans Wake*. Those plays are, after all, the essence that shapes the singular, highly original Dublin of Joyce’s last work. The last of the international contributors’ texts was that of Joaquim Mallabrè, a Reus-born lecturer, masterful translator



and active disseminator of all Joyce's work in Catalonia. It is not, I feel, superfluous to reiterate that Mallafrè crafted the acclaimed Catalan translation of *Ulysses*, which was the bestselling publication on Book Day (23 April) in 1981. Furthermore, it was he who launched translation studies in the Catalan culture with *Llengua de tribu i llengua de polis. Bases d'una traducció literària* (1991), his commentary on his version of Joyce's great novel.

Mallafrè gave readers an insight into the translator's perspective. He explained the extent to which he had needed to reflect on the linguistic awareness of the novelist, who had been born in a cultural context with a tradition of diglossia. Right at the beginning of his discourse he wrote the following words, with which he succeeded, as García Tortosa did, in forging a bond with Catalan readers, for obvious reasons:

Joyce wrote from a point of view of a set of historical circumstances, in a country which had not achieved its independence and which, when it did so, was to find its language replaced, though latent in a spiritual substratum. In his time, in his personal circumstances, Gaelic had already been substituted by English. [...] The relegation of Irish to tribal level was not enough to guarantee the substitution of the language. English had infiltrated even further, and Joyce learned to run and jump and play, to talk, observe, form opinions, pray, curse and sing in English. He lived in an environment in which Irish was a second-class language, hardly lifting its head among the people and more than anything a hobby for lovers of literature, who cannot avoid a somewhat archaeological reconquest. (Mallafrè 257)

Mallafrè's discourse examined a number of thorny issues related to contemporary man, including conflicts of identity,

the management of cultural heritage, the submission to imposed powers, and ideological and linguistic colonisation, i.e. acculturation. As he emphasised, those issues affect the Irish literary institution and, very tangibly, some of its great contemporary authors, specifically Joyce, George Bernard Shaw, Samuel Beckett, Seamus Heaney and Brian Friel.

Mallafre's approach was very different from those of the catalogue's other contributors. At no time did he attempt to sketch a Dublin street guide based on textual material. He considered the landscape to be language, an idea he expressed in his closing paragraph:

A language with constant familiar resonances, which can be placed in a real city and, at the same time, require the reader's effort to undertake the adventure of continued immersion in the kaleidoscope of language, of connotations, and cultural complicity. (Mallafre 260)

Mallafre conceived his text on the basis of absolute cultural complicity with the Catalan readership. That is why he made no kind of effort to reconstruct Dublin's urban geography. The catalogue's only Catalan author was perfectly aware that the best way to intellectually and emotionally connect Catalan readers with Joyce was to raise the literary institution's problem in terms of language and tradition, because, although not explicitly stated anywhere in the catalogue, there are evident similarities between the Irish and Catalan cultures. Ignasi Armengou, in contrast, did explicitly mention the first Catalan essay on Joyce, which was published in Manresa's *Ciutat* magazine in 1926:

Ireland's affairs are of very special interest to us. Not because there are many similarities between our temperament and that of the Irish, but because Ireland, as a political testing ground,

has a value for all communities fighting for their existence. In our case, we are interested in the test. We see the Emerald Isle as a laboratory where civil spirit has been subjected to great pressure. (Armengou 1926)

### **Plats bruts: “Tinc poder”**

*Plats bruts* was, without doubt, the most successful comedy series of the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century in Catalan television. By its second episode it already had over a million viewers. With Joel Joan (as David) and Jordi Sánchez (as López), actors from the Catalan star system, in the main roles, the series ran for six seasons. The first episode was broadcast on TV3 on 19 April 1999, and the last on 15 April 2002. The first season was dubbed into Spanish (*Platos sucios*, broadcast by Vía Digital and ETB2) and Galician (*Trapos sucios*, broadcast by TGV). Conceived as a sitcom, it was jointly produced by Kràmpack, El Terrat and Televisió de Catalunya, and directed by Oriol Grau, Lluís Manyoses and Joel Joan himself.<sup>2</sup>

One of the 73 episodes broadcast revolved around James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Specifically, it was episode 19 (shown on 2 June 1999), entitled “Tinc poder,” which was part of the second season. It was scripted by Sergi Pompermayer and directed by Oriol Grau and Lluís Manyoses. Of the episode’s two storylines, the one related to Joyce centres on David, a young student at the Institut del Teatre (Theatre Institute), who aspires to be an actor despite his limited intellect. David is a 24-year-old daddy’s boy who has left home and shares a flat in Barcelona’s Eixample district, but continues to live on money provided by his family. He is served by “la Carbonell,” a quick-witted, irritable housemaid who constantly has to get him out of tight spots.

The Joycean storyline comprises six scenes. In the first, David, la Carbonell and Emma are in the flat’s living room,

waiting for David's friend Pol. Pol apologises for his late arrival, which he attributes to having been reading a book. When Emma asks him about the book, Pol replies, "A masterpiece, a monument, a cathedral..." La Carbonell recognises it at once. It is James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which, she says, she had some great time reading. It immediately becomes obvious that David has never heard of the novel, although he tries to hide it. Furthermore, when Pol asks him about his theatre background, it is revealed that he does not even know who Samuel Beckett is. Trying to educate David, Pol assures him that the world is divided into those who have read *Ulysses* and those who have not. Feeling inferior and with wounded pride, David takes Joyce's novel and pledges to read it.

The second scene begins with David preparing to tackle the novel. He takes Mallafrè's Catalan translation, published by Edicions Proa, out of a bag. He makes coffee while singing a popular tune from a television advert, puts on some classical music, pulls up a footrest, dons his glasses and calls la Carbonell to read to him! She does so and it is not long before he is half asleep. For the umpteenth time, he asks her who Stephen Dedalus is. She cuffs him by way of admonishment, as she has already explained time and again that Dedalus is the main character. David tells her that he does not understand why the novel is called *Ulysses* if the main character's name is Stephen Dedalus. He starts doing exercise to keep himself awake, at which point la Carbonell reaches the end of her tether and says that she has had enough. She throws the book at David and tells him to read it himself. Despairingly, David says that he will rent the video of the film. The housemaid defiantly tells him to go ahead and do so.

In the third scene, a distressed David enters the kitchen and tells la Carbonell that he has been to 22 video shops, three art galleries and four film libraries. His desperate search has been in vain. He has not found the film adaptation of *Ulysses* anywhere, not even in a couple of sex shops in which he has also looked for it. La Carbonell informs him that there is no

such adaptation. David, in an ongoing state of surprise, says that if the novel has never been made into a film, it cannot be all that good. He adds that it is no wonder, as the book is extremely dull, with no action, no sex, etc. He asks what sort of idiot published it. La Carbonell disdainfully tells him that the publisher made a fortune. David changes the subject, telling her to make him some popcorn as he has rented a film from a sex shop.

In the fourth scene, David is watching *Teletubbies* when Emma enters the living room and tells him that she is leaving his copy of *Ulysses* on the bookshelf. A stunned David asks her if she has read it. She replies that she began it the night before and finished it at six in the morning. She admits to not having understood a great deal, but says that it has thrilled her. She leaves to go to the library, saying that she does not want to distract David in case he loses track of the storyline in the children's programme.

In the fifth scene, David shows up in the bar that Pol manages. Pol asks David where he has been all week, saying that he has not "seen hide nor hair of him." David eagerly tells him that he has finished reading *Ulysses*, that he has enjoyed it, that he has understood it all and that the part without full stops, commas or capital letters is "amazing." Pol then admits that he has never read beyond page 30 of the book. David gets annoyed, saying that he has read it all and has made a "superhuman effort." Pol says that David is actually the only person he knows who has read it from beginning to end. David tells him that Emma has read it too, but she confesses that she has not, that she only said she had to pull his leg because he had offended her. A despairing David asks la Carbonell to tell him that she has read it too, but she says that she has not. Tortured by the idea of having become a *rara avis*, David asks all the bar's customers if they have read *Ulysses*, but nobody has. At that point, he admits to not having understood the book at all and asks Pol about what he said regarding the world being divided into those who have read *Ulysses* and those who have not. His friend tells him that it is true. David accuses Pol of having made him an

outcast. Pol continues to tease him, saying that he ought to read Immanuel Kant's *De mundi sensibilis atque intelligibilis forma et principiis* next.

The final scene features López and David, the two bungling main characters, who are both feeling low. David is reading Kant's *De mundi sensibilis atque intelligibilis forma et principiis* while López tells him about the latest thing to go wrong in his life. David replies by telling him how tragic it is to be "hooked" on reading. He complains that he no longer does anything other than read (he does not watch television, go out, etc.). David pretentiously says that he resignedly accepts that being different is the price he has to pay for being part of a select group, that of inveterate readers.

Despite containing certain errors regarding the novel and the author, the Joycean episode of *Plats bruts* made good comedic use of some of the most familiar aspects of *Ulysses*, specifically the cryptic nature of the text (and the consequent narcoleptic effect), the idea that those who have read it form an elite, and the renown of the closing monologue's linguistic experimentation. Furthermore, it situated Joyce at the centre of the polarisation between high culture and popular culture, and between written culture and screen culture.

In any case, "Tinc poder" clearly showed that Joyce's novel remained a point of reference recognised by a broad section of the Catalan audience at the end of the twentieth century. The scriptwriter was well aware that without that shared familiarity, viewers would not be able to relate to the episode and find it amusing. Joyce's connection with the native culture was not a feature of this cultural product either. In that respect, the fact that David was reading a Catalan translation was never the object of parody, something that would have been logical in a series that frequently caricatured pro-Catalan notions.

## Conclusions

The exhibition and catalogue *El Dublín de James Joyce* and the episode “Tinc poder” of the sitcom *Plats bruts* were two cultural products with radically different conceptions and objectives. Nonetheless, both contributed to raising the Catalan public’s awareness of the figure of Joyce as a universal benchmark as an author, as well as to reinforcing the legendary status of *Ulysses*. They were two additions to a long succession of Joycean manifestations that have arisen in Catalonia. Neither of them, however, established the slightest dialogical relationship with the Joycean tradition itself.

The absence of a connection with that tradition was rather logical in the case of the episode of the television series, given that it dealt with the subject of Joyce in a frivolous manner and was amusing precisely because it merely revolved around clichés. However, it was not so logical in the case of the exhibition and catalogue, both of which, it must be reiterated, were magnificent. That absence clearly showed that, due in no small part to the particular historical vicissitudes of the academic discipline, managing its own cultural heritage was still problematic for the Catalan literary institution in the final decade of the twentieth century. That problem not only existed –and still does– in the Catalan literary institution; it also existed in the Irish literary institution. It was for that reason, as Mallafrè reminded us, that Joyce made it a theme in his work. That is one of a number of factors behind Joyce’s status as a universal author.

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[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SH5XjWy3X\\_A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SH5XjWy3X_A)



**Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> While the series comprised only four exhibitions, the same idea was used again in 2011 in *La Trieste de Magris* (*The Trieste of Magris*, 9 March - 17 July), an exhibition whose curator was Giorgio Pressburger and in which Claudio Magris himself also participated. It is worth noting, incidentally, that Joyce once again enjoyed special treatment, with the exhibition featuring an area on the Irish novelist's relationship with Trieste.

<sup>2</sup> The series has been repeated on different channels a number of times. In the summer of 2012 it was once again shown in an early evening slot on TV3, the primary channel of Catalonia's public broadcasting network (the episode involving Joyce was shown on 27 July).