

IMBERT, G. *El transformismo televisivo. Postelevisión e imaginarios sociales*. Cátedra, 2008. ISBN 9788437624990

BY NEL·LO PELLISSER ROSSELL

Lecturer of audiovisual communication at the Universitat de València-
Estudi General



Lost in the desert of what is hyperreal

As the author himself warns us, the book he is presenting is the natural continuation of a previous work: *El zoo visual. De la televisió espectacular a la televisió especular*. In this work, Gérard Imbert starts from the assumption that television is a machine for producing spectacle, established in production from a reality that is *sui generis*, i.e. “that takes pleasure in speculating and in the hyperreal and that proceeds by means of the liquefaction (or even liquidation) of identities” (Imbert 2008: 226).

Now, *El transformismo televisivo. Postelevisión e imaginarios sociales* (2008), his latest work produced in book form, gives a new perspective of his analysis of the medium, establishing that television plays with this reality, transforms it, manipulates it, duplicates and even deforms it. The freaks show now becomes a stage where all kinds of grotesque figures file past, individuals metamorphosed by the excitement caused by the set design of the TV stage and camera lenses. From this perception comes the repeated use made by the author throughout the work of the semantic field of theatrical transformism (cabaret, performance, clowns, drag queens etc.) to refer to and analyse the recent mutations of television.

Let us look at a little history. Paleo-television, a concept coined by Umberto Eco and appearing in other authors such as Dominique Wolton and Jean-Louis Missika, refers to a time when the generalist model of television predominated, tutored by the state in an age of monopoly. If, with the transition to a commercial, private model, paleo-television was no longer a “window onto the world” but became a “projection space”, a mirror of the subject, with post-television, through deformation, parody and reflexivity, television looks at itself in a deformed mirror that projects a grotesque and disfigured image. In other words: spectacle, simulation and duplication as the three stages in this process of transforming reality. And it is this “duplication” that brings together a whole series of omnipresent proposals in recent programming, such as programmes that parody news programmes, humorous imitations, imitating celebrities and gossip news.

In this new book, Gerard Imbert, lecturer at the Universidad Carlos III in Madrid, agrees with the concept of post-television and describes it as “more fun-focused television that plays with roles and breaks with the pact of verisimilitude that has dominated the whole modern story” (p. 34, in Spanish) “[...] an inflation of narrative and expressive forms that affects both tele-reality and the entertainment programmes that invade the screens in night-time slots, fulfilling a function that is clearly carnival in nature” (p. 44) “[...] a discourse that takes pleasure in playing with reality, that ignores the boundaries between genres and categories, dilutes the very notion of reality and stable identities, plays with the porosity and status of telling the truth, the basis of the credibility of messages and the foundation of a reasonable relation with the reality represented, bringing us close to fiction without us actually being in the genres of fiction” (p. 55).

The theoretical foundation and methodology of the work *El transformismo televisivo* is “deliberately multidisciplinary”, as classified by the author himself. Consequently, its pages contain contributions from the semiology of Roland Barthes, from the semiotics of A. J. Greimas and his school applied to the field of mass communication, with a socio-anthropological dimension (J. Baudrillard, M. Maffesoli and J. Ibáñez, among others), and with the remarkable presence of the communication perspective (U. Eco, F. Colombo, O. Calabrese, P. Virilio, J. González Requena and J. Martín Barbero, among a long list of authors).

For G. Imbert, the starting point is that the world’s great stories are in crisis and that television believes increasingly in what is miniscule, in what is everyday, in what is residual. This is therefore a narrative issue, the manifestation of new narrative forms, of new ways of seeing and of relating with knowledge.

The book is organised into two blocks. In the first, entitled “Playing with reality”, the author dissects television as a space for transforming and deforming reality, with the emergence of the situation that what is grotesque, what is a freak is appealing, contrary to what we might expect.

The second part, under the title “Playing with identity” and, consequently, the crisis of reality, the author tackles, across the

board, those aspects with a strong symbolic content that are relevant to the medium of TV. One is the construction of identity and the games established around it, such as loaned identities encouraged by television, which we can find in reality shows focusing on people living together, such as *Survivors* and *The Farm*; as well as in other proposals such as *Extreme makeover* or *The weakest link*. The symbolic content is also perceived in how the body becomes the great reference point of television discourse: specifically in symbolic violence, death being the great absence in television representation while, at the same time, hypervisible death exists.

In summary, this new text by G. Imbert, and as he has done for years now, contributes new arguments to open up (or rather, re-open) the debate concerning television's role in the contemporary world and how its content is constructed and projected. This proposal is quite stimulating, considering the audiovisual crossroads we currently find ourselves at, although, as a whole, perhaps it can be accused of repeating certain expressions and key ideas of the work, possibly due to the fact that some of the chapters were published previously as part of collective books or as articles, such as chapters VI and IX. Nonetheless, these repetitions take on new specific dimensions in the structure and development of this work.

The book also highlights the fact that the author is an attentive viewer of the discursive flow of television, of the palimpsest of TV programming in Spain, France and the United States. We should also add the broad theoretical spectrum used to tackle its analysis, ranging from the semio-narrative dimension of the discourses to the socio-anthropological dimension, without losing sight of the communication perspective regarding the effects and social functions of messages.

Summing up, *El transformismo televisivo. Posttelevisión e imaginarios sociales* seems to be an appropriate proposal for analysing certain television programmes, as it includes the multiplicity of audiovisual languages and of the types of TV discourse and produces a methodology to be applied to the different formats of TV programming as a whole, within a narrative and symbolic focus of the core, namely the spectacular component of audiovisual messages, within the context of the theories of spectacle and aesthetics. It is also a useful instrument for attempting to find one's way in the desert of what is hyper-real, as described by the author. As G. Imbert reminds us, aesthetic, ethical, moral and symbolic values have been lost in this forging ahead. Moreover, post-television is ranked above the qualified mediator, "the subject of knowing", as well as the very concept of *mediation*, as the book stresses more than once (p. 23-25 and 90). Perhaps, we might add, now is the time to demand this, to demand this again and regain it. And moreover to train viewers to competently deal with this kind of discourse. Since, in our opinion, as far as programmers and media managers are concerned we can expect few considerations that go beyond the counting of results, if we look at the economic and business logic underpinning a large part of the television stories analysed.

References

- IMBERT, G. *El zoo visual. De la televisión espectacular a la televisión especular*. Barcelona: Gedisa, 2003.
- Eco, U. *La estrategia de la ilusión*. Barcelona: Lumen, 1986.