

From hybridisation to liquefaction of categories and identities in post-television

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Abstract

With the current vogue for reality TV, television is breaking new ground, where outlines are increasingly blurred and hybrid formats and unstable forms tend towards hybridisation. This phenomenon reflects a destabilising of narrative and aesthetic but also symbolic forms, affecting the very categories which frame our representation of the world and the 'other' and exercising an albeit ludic influence on the construction of identity. The cause of this is the liquefaction of the inherited categories of modernity and, at a deeper level, a crisis in dichotomous thinking.

Key words

Television, imaginaries, representation, identity, alterity.

Resum

Amb l'auge de la telerealtat, la televisió s'endinsa en territoris nous, amb contorns cada cop menys definits, amb formats híbrids i formes inestables que tendeixen a la hibridació. Aquest fenomen reflecteix una desestabilització de les formes que pot ser de tipus narratiu i estètic, però també d'ordre simbòlic, ja que afecta les categories que regeixen la nostra representació del món i de l'altre, i reverteix –encara que sigui de manera lúdica– en la construcció de les identitats. Sorgeix de la líquüefacció de les categories heretades de la modernitat i, més profundament, d'una crisi del pensament dicotòmic.

Paraules clau

Televisió, imaginaris, representació, identitat, alteritat..

Introduction

With the rise of reality TV, television is breaking new ground, with increasingly blurred limits, hybrid formats and unstable forms tending towards hybridisation. This phenomenon is not only affecting television; it reflects the destabilising of narrative and aesthetic forms in general, with a tendency towards excess, parody and playing with forms which, in the 1980s, authors like Omar Calabrese (1986) described in aesthetic terms as “neo-baroque”.

Phenomena like distortion, caricature and “transformism”, as I have termed it (Imbert 2008), illustrate quite literally this capacity of television as a medium to alter, transform and play with reality, thereby crossing over the boundaries of format and genre. But it is more than that: this instability in human identity and relations is a response to the instability of the world and how it is represented, as many students of post-modernity have noted when referring to relationships and loves as “liquid”, using the term of Zygmunt Bauman (2005).

This instability is evident in the representation of the world and the “other” offered by television, with the creation of hybrid narrative universes in which it is hard to distinguish reality from fiction, in a versatile universe dominated by the idea of play. It is no coincidence that many of the new reality

TV formats are game shows. As Borges said, it is a matter of “testing” the limits of reality and seeing how far the medium can go in its exploration of new television universes.

Putting to one side the triviality of the medium and the quality of its programmes, this is a deeply significant phenomenon in that it affects our relationship with reality and involves a mutation of our representation and perception of identity and alterity. The thesis I wish to develop here is that hybridisation does not only affect narrative categories (television formats) but also alters the main symbolic categories which govern our relationship with the world and the “other” and which, in the final instance and albeit in a ludic way, affect the construction of identity.

Through the instability of its forms, the medium facilitates this game-playing with the referent. For the reality it builds is *sui generis*, an improvised reality which inaugurates a new narrative model based on a performative relationship, not just with reality but also with identity. This relationship is essentially ambivalent, a way of reconciling reality (the real world) and imaginaries (other possible worlds). Or in more generic terms, it is a way of being in two categories at once. This is what defines post-television: the move from game-playing with reality to game-playing with identity itself.

1. Hybridisation of formats

If there's one thing which characterises reality TV, it is its ability to syncretically absorb several formats, going beyond the borders of genres and categories alike. This is how *Big Brother* and its series of sub-formats came about: as a hybrid macro-format which combines sociological experiment with game-playing, mixing documentary and fiction and, in so doing, disrupting perceptive categories and making us unsure whether a show is "reality" or a simulation.¹

It consecrates a televisual *entre-deux*, as I have termed it, a credible but unlikely and essentially ambivalent universe: which is one thing and is another at the same time but neither of them separately. As in role play, I create my own "character", I identify with it and from this "fiction" I interrelate with other real characters in the *ex nihilo* conditions of a co-existence created for the purpose. And I do so within a spatial context and within a social convention which has no basis in reality: the *Big Brother* house and the community created there do not correspond to any existing model of sociality.

As I concluded in another work,² some factors which contribute to this dilution of frontiers and subsequent phenomena of genre hybridisation are common to several characteristic formats of this modality (particularly reality shows, game shows, talk shows and sitcom-type series):

- Increasingly, the reality which the medium constructs belongs less to the representative order, with a referential function and which aims to reflect objective reality; and more to simulation, a model of transformation/distortion of a reality created through/by the medium, tending towards a reflectivity which fulfils a speculative function.

- This evolution of the model of a manufactured / transformed reality tends to offer a self-referential reality, with characters who are constructed within the medium and whose profiles evolve in accordance with the interrelational dynamic. Seen from this perspective, television acts as a *destinator* of the narrative (Greimas), within a certain *autopiesis* which sits better with fiction than information.

- Of course, some elements of informative discourse remain, through the creation of an actuality which runs parallel to the socio-political actuality, with the indefinite/unlimited space-time (pure transitivity) which is of everyday life itself, as occurs in reality shows and sitcoms. This is based on:

- A deictic here-and-now, linked to the actors' own experiences, which gives a degree of *presentism* to the discourse and reveals the "tyranny of time".

- The permanent *performance* of the actors, *performative* in nature, giving substance to the narrative and reality to what it enunciates-shows.

- A stereotyped spatiality: the *Big Brother* house-studio, the microcosms associated with professions in sitcoms, which obey strong narrative conventions that border on caricature with their forced way and belong to the fiction narrative in spite of laying claim to reality.

- Finally, the creation of utopian living spaces (*u-topos*: nowhere), which are simultaneously no space in particular and all spaces at once. These created conventional spaces belong neither to a completely real space (they lack the intimacy of real domestic space) nor to a fictitious space as such. What occurs, then, is a theaterisation of intimacy as public exhibition, diluting the boundaries between public and private and creating what Serge Tisseron (2001) has called an "extimacy".

The dilution of the boundaries between the major genres arises precisely from the appearance of a kind of no-man's-land, a new narrative space in which separate genres are *con-fused* and exchange their functions.

At this point I will revisit the distinction established by François Jost (2001) in his analysis of enunciation of TV programmes. The author distinguishes three main modes of enunciation which define, in terms of veridiction, the attitude or intention of the producer of the message and the viewer's expectations:

- the authenticating mode (authentifiant), referring to programmes based on information, proven facts, which aim to reinforce what we know about the world along a true/false axis and help to consolidate our impression of authenticity through live scenes, for example;

- the fictive mode, based on likelihood, which involves TV viewers accepting the conventionality of what they are viewing, an "as if" (*faire semblance*) which conditions our reception of the message;

- the ludic mode, governed by an autonomous system of rules, sometimes far removed from everyday reality and based on a universe whose coherence depends on respect for the rules of the game, which have been conveyed to the viewers.

In the new TV formats, the borders between these three types have become quite blurred, and this has several consequences.

- First, the *dilution* of one of TV's main functions: information vs. entertainment.

- Next, the weakening of discursive instances, displaced by enunciative instances with the subsequent trivialisation of speech. The substitution of expert discourse (those with standing and authority) by a presumed *vox populi*, the opinion of anonymous persons, those with no name, who voice opinions without having the competence to do so but subsequently acquire authority as "celebrities".

- Finally, this converts television into a ludic space, a field for experimentation and manipulation (in the semiotic sense: a space for *doing-saying*).

2. Dilution of TV's main functions³

Today's television is undergoing a progressive blurring of the traditional differentiation between its functions: the informative (linked to its referential purpose), the recreational (entertainment, escapism) and the educational (didactic).

Nowadays, informative entertainment (infotainment) dominates not only informative discourse but other formats where serious and trivial content coexists, combined in what are known as “portmanteau programmes” (talk shows, for example). Let’s look at some examples of this fusion of functions:

- On some channels there is obvious contamination of the television news by resources more appropriate to fiction narrative. For example, the dramatisation of information by video-clip pacing, the use of striking images or music of the type usually found in action films; alternating serious information with celebrity news or, vice versa, using journalistic techniques for celebrity news as a way of legitimising trash input.

- In the para-informative discourse too (docudrama, or the reconstruction of real facts using simulation), there is a mix of journalistic techniques (hand-held camera to give the effect of live recording, filming at the scene of the events) and fiction-type resources (the use of actors and dramatisation techniques taken from action narrative).

- And conversely, entertainment is taking in current affairs and debates: the talk show is a hold-all, and current affairs have a place even in gossip talk shows.

- In the 1990s we also saw how debate programmes were completely contaminated by spectacularity with the debating of ideas replaced by personal confrontation. More recently, depth of thought has been giving way to “clip” thinking, with limits on speaking time and reflection replaced by eye-catching formulas, or the current fashion for variety shows with politicians.

- Turning this around, fiction can take on a didactic function, as in series for young people which provide models of behaviour. These can have an educational function in making up for the deficiencies or obsolescence of traditional means of mediation (family and school). Television is taking on the mediating function without ever being asked to do so.

- To sum up, there are scores of hybridisation phenomena in the new television macro-formats, headed by the Big Brother-type reality shows which combine a whole range of formats and functions.

But the main mutation is the one affecting the very concept of actuality (which fills the informative agenda) linked to the change in status of the public sphere, its broadening to take in aspects of private life (intimacy, marital secrets, etc.) and the extension of actuality to aspects which, until recently, had no place on the informative agenda.

3. Reality TV as *entre-deux*: between reality and fiction

The change in the narrative regime of second-generation reality shows (*Big Brother* and its spin-offs) is very striking:

- The presence of a strong narrative sense in genres which are traditionally characterised by a basic narrative pattern based on the *quête mythique* model: contests whose structure involves holding successive heats until the goal is reached (the prize for the most valiant).

- The change from the univocal narrative model inherited from literary fiction and cinema, based on predictability and with a planned structure, to an improvised model with some unpredictability which incorporates multi-vocality, in which the privileged and omnipresent narrator gives way to a plurality of anonymous narrators.

- Contamination from the authenticating, referential-documentary type genres with a didactic function: see the “sociological” pretensions of the first version of *Big Brother*.

- Blurring of the borders between authenticity and manipulation, between what is real and what refers to a simulation of reality.

- The medium’s generation of a *sui generis* reality, an *entre-deux* which fascinates precisely because of its ambivalence, a utopian space set apart from places where there is social representation.

- A tendency to favour contestants for their pragmatic competencies, in particular their ability to adapt to the medium, rather than their cognitive competency. The new examples of *homo televisioni* acquire their competency within and from the performance itself, from their involvement as an actor in and accomplished user of the medium, from their ability to turn the game rules of television to their advantage, or from looking inwards and exhibiting their intimacies.

Contestants therefore become their own narrators by doing (in dramatic action and its subsequent dramatisation by the medium) and by saying (through the use of the confessional), setting up a self-referential reality.

The common man is therefore favoured before the expert: a subject produced by the medium who does not achieve fulfilment through historical action (as part of a social project) but in trivial, everyday acts (the ephemeral-occasional *par excellence*), with a strong experimental element. Hence the particularly fragmented aspect of these narrations.

Récits éclatés, as these fragmented narratives have been called (Margrit Tröhler 2002). Multi-focused, with multiple protagonists and narrations like films and docu-series which lie half-way between fiction and non-fiction, these narrations offer a “dramaturgy of the everyday” (Goffman) which springs from the very interaction of the actors in front of the camera: “autopersonalities”, as Tröhler calls them, due to the sensitive self-presentation of their social role, “entered in the here-and-now of the pro-filmic representation”.

The ultimate expression of this dramatisation is the sitcom, which ably combines euphoria with dysphoria, inclining towards the latter in hospital or police series. It lies at the crossroads between public and private, constantly playing with the private aspects of figures in social settings. It also explores this *entre-deux* category but within a particular space-time structure: the chronicle, the day-to-day existence, time without unity only sustained by its serial and diffuse transitivity.

“Today”, writes Tröhler, “there is an important *iconography of the everyday* which has its own tradition and is developing its own conventions for representing proximity, experience and

authentic testimony. The effect of proximity is as strong or stronger than the filmic universe, and in most narrations the stories described have multiple protagonists, contemporary with our era. Narration is simultaneous and takes place in the present, but it juxtaposes and superposes many social, axiological and emotional spaces in its content and expression. These films therefore create sociocultural pictures with multiple facets, which coexist and stand out within a complex relational dynamic, pictures which somewhat blur the pragmatic differences between documentary and fiction, and appear to favour mixed genres (or vice versa)."

4. Blurring of the frontiers between identity-based categories

Ambivalence arises when frontiers are diluted, when we are in two categories at once or between the two. This occurs at various levels: in the blurring of the frontiers between reality vs. fiction, information vs. entertainment, public vs. private, as we have already seen, but also between identity and alterity, and it turns into a game played with the limits of identity. What I have termed *post-television* (Imbert 2008) plainly belongs here.

Post-television breaks with identity-based logic and becomes a *game played with identities* or, in other terms and revisiting the distinction of Michel Maffesoli, *identifications*. We can see this in survival reality shows (*Survivors*, *The Farm* and the new series *Préstame tu vida* (Lend me your life) in Spain; *Le château de mes rêves* (The castle of my dreams) in France, where roles are exchanged; *The Bachelor*, *Black/White*, where whites put themselves in the skin of blacks and vice versa, or *Extreme makeover* in the US, where a person can change their face by plastic surgery.

Here the purpose is not to be oneself but to be *someone else*: to better oneself, to achieve goals which at first seem impossible, to identify with an unusual role, to exchange roles, while disregarding any sense of the ridiculous, shame or integrity – in a word, disregarding one's public image, sometimes even renouncing one's dignity, as in *The weakest link*.

This is a game, then, which does not compromise the subject's deepest identity, undoubtedly because it is not reality. As in role play, the framework is real but the role is borrowed. In reality shows, what is at stake is the identity of the subject, testing his or her ability to resist others and to rise to the occasion. But this is a game of identification, using borrowed identities. It consists of a narrative device, with its own specific goals, defined tests and framework for action, where everything is orientated towards achieving all that television demands, the objectives it assigns and the goals it defines. "Do what television tells you", is how we could define these programmes.

Whereas programmes like *Big Brother* made an effort to recreate an *illusion of reality*, here we are within a convention that is closer to fiction, and the creation of an *illusion of*

identity. We are *another* within a real framework (which complies with all the conditions of reality, without actually being so), although this means pretending, "acting". Obviously, the symbolic and moral categories of the real world do not rule here. What is important is not to be authentic or conform to the truth, but to adapt to the role assigned or conform to the role. To appear as this *other* with whom someone identifies during the exercise, a game of forms rather than fundamentals, when *one* merges with *the other*.

From here on, all situations are predictable, all identifications possible in a game with what is prohibited (temptation) but also the imaginary, with what I have called the incredible (everything that breaks with representational conventions, the verisimilitude on which all modern narrative is based).

Even this pact of verisimilitude can be based on deception, when contestants do not know the identity of one of their number. Some programmes like *Blind trust* tested people's loyalty to their partners, with actors in the role of lovers who were presumed to have seduced one of the couple without the other being aware of the subterfuge, etc. Or more recently in France, programmes like *Greg le Millionnaire* (Greg the Millionaire, a spin-off of *The Bachelor*), in which a man chooses his partner from a "harem" provided by the programme, receives her in his luxurious mansion and invites her to fantastic places, while she does not know that, in real life, the "millionaire" is only a humble plumber. This does not stop women having to pass some very unedifying tests on the way, like sweeping out stables.

This resource reaches its climax in "candid camera" programmes, when this "consensual deception" is taken even further.

In all these examples, there is a subject built in/by television who moves within a universe of values and spheres of action that have little to do with real values, within ludic-fictitious processes of the construction/deconstruction of identity: *borrowed identities*, as we will call them, in this typical post-modern game of identification.

Post-television is therefore no longer a place to affirm identity: a stable inherited identity, the result of historical process and social acquisition, but instead is a ludic space, a game of identifications:

- Momentary identifications, for as long as the programme, series, game show or reality show lasts.
- Ephemeral identifications (with neither historic nor symbolic commitment), unstable, exchangeable, in constant renewal as formats revolve, at the intersection between the real and the ludic.

Our hypothesis is that, in its own type of entertainment, particularly in game shows with a goal (artistic, survival) and trials (physical or psychological), post-television occurs within a logic of identification rather than of identity. Closer to the game than to the real world, it may take place within a real framework (*Survivor*), or claim to recreate credible situations for coexistence (*The Farm*). However, it dramatises actions which are unthinkable in real life and so draws us increasingly closer

to fiction. It therefore contributes to blurring the frontiers between categories.

5. Post-television as a place of the unformed

Post-television is therefore the place *par excellence* for the projection of imaginaries, reflecting an *unformed* subject,⁴ projected both in a “character” and in reality shows (playing him or herself or transformed into someone else, so this is obviously an idealised, distorted, exaggerated character), who identifies with someone else, sometimes his or her opposite, as in the game shows mentioned above.

But post-television also plays with the representation of the social “other”:

- The marginal subject, removed from the socialisation process, an outsider, like the social chronicles *21 días* (21 days) - Cuatro, *Comando actualidad* (Actualty commando) - La 1, *Vidas anónimas* (Anonymous lives) - laSexta, *Mi cámara y yo* (My camera and me) - Telemadrid.

- Or the exotic “other”, as in *Perdidos en la tribu* (Lost in the tribe) - Cuatro.

This produces substantial mutations in the symbolic categories which guide our representation of the world, in particular spatial and time categories. For example, distant vs. close (closely experiencing distant or alien occurrences) or inside vs. outside, through disseminating and exhibiting intimacy (“extimacy”), etc.

From this we can deduce an erosion of the frontiers between genres (social or anthropological chronicles and simulation games) but also, more generally, a diffusion of the main perceptive and symbolic categories of public vs. private, distant vs. close.

On this question, Olivier Mongin (1991) uses the concept of the erosion of mediation to refer to this oscillation of the subject between extremes. Between the omnipresence of the audience, which pokes its nose into all spheres of social life, and the return to the private, taking refuge in intimacy; between the distance of the spectacle of the world (*actuality writ large*) and the proximity of reality shows (“*actuality TV*”, writ small):

“Between the microcosm of individual or family and the macrocosm of the planet and all men, there are few intermediary stages. We live, for better or worse, at the pace of all or nothing. This makes it difficult to create a story, catches out politicians engaged in live communication and impoverishes the public space whose role is to display the events that pass through it and disappear.”

Undoubtedly this fracture between micro and macro is also due to the fact that media space is so all-enveloping that it not only acts as an intermediary but also creates its own referents, which stand between the subject and the world (the objective referents) and separate it still further from serious actuality and public affairs. But television, and other media like the internet, creates a self-referential, substitute world, an alternative to the

real world, feeding off its own references and keeping us at bay.

And to complete this mix, intimacy is made public, and the alien (Reality TV’s life stories, everyday life of the exote) is brought closer (lived as if it was one’s own, appropriated), confusing planes even more. Actuality can be both what is distant (international actuality) and close (celebrity actuality). The microscopic (small stories, anything from violence to black actuality, from love-interest to gossip, from events to the gutter press), competes with the macroscopic (history, large global events, the violence of war, etc.)

Public/private, distant/close, planes which mingle in the informative agenda and the citizen’s consciousness. Public passions (political) mingle with their private equivalents (media-based); the intimacy of public figures feels close (even the illness of leaders who are not celebrities can be aired in public).

Conversely, we make our intimacy public business. We need only look at the television exhibition of practices of “accompaniment” during mass catastrophes and the host of specialists who intervene in suffering or work with grief. These days even pain is in the public domain and television does not hesitate to show it, not only in news formats but even in some entertainment programmes, including game shows which impose repulsive or humiliating trials.

Conclusion: from hybridisation to playing with limits

If television is fascinating, it’s because it is informative, for the games it increasingly permits with reality and identity, for skipping from category to category (or confusing them), and for the imaginary projections it encourages. What I wanted to show here is that hybridisation, far from being an isolated phenomenon, is linked to others, the aesthetic (the neo-baroque: excess, a penchant for distortion), narrative (open narrations which allow multiple identifications, like role play) and the symbolic (an unstable relationship with reality and ambivalence towards the categories that structure our representation of the world).

All this arises from the unstable nature of the reality constructed by the medium, from its capacity to create “outer limit” situations (at the limits of verisimilitude) with the risk of endangering the authenticity of its content, and leaving the field open to all kinds of manipulation. It makes it easier to play with the limits found in other media (through fiction in the cinema, virtual identification on the internet), revealing current uncertainty and the implied need for escapism.

From narrative hybridisation to identity ambivalence is only a step, and one which television is continually taking, albeit playfully and under the guise of entertainment. Nonetheless, this reveals an evolution of form (expressive, narrative, aesthetic), a mutation of identity and relations (now more “liquid”, to use Bauman’s expression), and a propensity to play with limits. The latter has arisen due to the liquefaction of the inherited categories of modernity and, at a deeper level, a crisis in dichotomous thinking. Hybridisation forms part of this, arising from a

tendency to rewrite codes, from the formal (rewriting, uniting, mixing, parody) to the symbolic (frontiers, abysses, limits).

So much exploring of limits results in a blurring of identities and a diffusing of the frontiers between identity and alterity. For, in post-television, I can be someone else or multiple others, as in Jaco van Dormael's film, *Mr. Nobody*.

If I have insisted so much on this aspect it has been to explore the origin and ramifications of the phenomenon, going beyond the usual interpretations of hybridisation, as well as to advocate a widening of our methodological perspectives. Television studies must get away from purely formal and narrative fields and open up to a semiotic-symbolic approach to and socio-anthropological understanding of the TV phenomenon if they are to escape from the impasse of audience research, with its closed questions on the relationship between product and taste.

Notes

- 1 On the phenomena of hybridisation of formats in this programme, please see my book *El zoo visual. De la televisión espectacular a la televisión especular*. Barcelona: Gedisa, 2003.
- 2 "De lo grotesco como contaminación de los géneros en los nuevos formatos televisivos. Formato y dimensiones discursivas". In: *DeSignis, journal of the Federación Latino-Americana de Semiótica*, no. 7-8. "Los formatos de la televisión", 2005. Issue coordinated by Charo Lacalle.
- 3 I will summarise here some points from the chapter on television in my latest book: *La sociedad informe. Posmodernidad, ambivalencia y juego con los límites*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2010.
- 4 For greater detail please see the above-mentioned book: *La sociedad informe*.

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