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Introduction

In the following essay I will explore documentary and reality TV in relationship to contemporary social and culture trends, exploring the audience interests in other people's lives.

In the past years, the explosion of reality TV programmes has revealed the viewers preferences for realism instead of fiction. Both formats (documentary and reality TV) are based on ordinary lives and real stories but it is important to remark that even though reality television is influenced by earlier observation documentary these current shows are based on entertainment.

If reality TV is so popular, why does most critical commentary regard in a negative light? Traditionally, documentary is considered a "sober" genre (Nichols, 1991) with a strong tradition of social commentary, while reality TV is seems as a trivial one. However, the increase of new hybrids formats blurs this idea finding documentaries based on entertainment and reality shows based on social issues.

"New hybrid versions of documentary and reality television produce a new kind of public sphere in which shared knowledge and the experience of the everyday take centre stage", (Bignell, 2005:71)

Reality TV has broken the boundary between private and public. Audience wants to feel the guilty pleasure, a voyeuristic experience, of feeling part of ordinary people's

lives and they demands to watch it on television. According to Baudrillard, this idea is based on “a kind of primal pleasure, of anthropological joy in images, a kind of brute fascination unencumbered by aesthetic, moral, social or political judgments” (Baudrillard quoted in *Representing Reality*, 1991:6). We have always been interested in other people’s lives because they are a reflection of our own lives, our own ordinariness. Baudrillard suggests that images “are immoral, and that their fundamental power lies in this immorality” (Baudrillard quoted in *Representing Reality*, 1991:6).

This “immorality” disappears once it takes part of our visual culture. Thanks to reality shows and entertainment documentaries, viewers are allowed to watch, judge and “enjoy seeing the pain or distress of others” (Oxford Dictionary definition of “voyeur”). Nevertheless, the pleasure of watching these images and experiencing other people’s feelings goes beyond reality TV, viewers could be considered well or bad looked voyeurs but the reality is voyeurism is inherent in our society and not just in television spectators.

The 21st Century Documentary

Is reality TV the new documentary? Some people would reject the idea arguing the lack of depth in these programmes compared to documentaries but its popularity as well as the hybrid formats might points the opposite. Even both genres are based on realism and human behaviour, reality shows are considered superficial and trivial, but consumer society is actually like that. For this reason, we could assume that reality TV shows the human’s desires and attitudes of our era.

“The arguments about Reality TV as the end of documentary are part of a larger postmodernist arguments that Western society is in a condition in which history ceases to move forward in a progressive way with the consequent which the documentary tradition has espoused” (Bignell, 2005:26).

Reality TV is influenced by observational cinema. Quoting Nichols, this genre “affords the viewer an opportunity to look in on and overhear something of the lived experience of others” (1991:42). This idea links with Baudrillard “primal pleasure” theory explained on the introduction. While reality TV audience could be considered as gossip voyeurs, documentary viewers are regarded as aware ones. Although is true that many of these programmes contribute to develop this superficiality, some of them also show the reality in a critical way.

“Reality TV has also claimed to signal the death of documentary, killing off a great tradition of observational and socially concerned programme-making” (Bignell, 2005:26).

Are we experiencing the death of documentary? It might be too soon to affirm it, but the fact is nowadays reality shows have more spaces on TV than documentaries. This replacement on television schedules is based on audience demands. However, there will always exist viewers concerned in understanding reality instead of watching triviality. For this reason, the documentary genre will never die; it will probably convert into a new format according to the times we are living. The concept of

“popular documentary” is an example of this transformation into a kind of “documentary entertainment, which in itself can pose problems for critics, but of course increases the chances for film-makers to find audiences” (Dovey, 2000:36).

Michael Moore is one of these filmmakers who have turned documentary into a popular genre. All of his movies are shown at theatres and they always have an enormous promotion on media. Moore is one of these documentary’s filmmakers who have preferred to connect with the big audience instead of just make movies for a few. Films like *Roger & Me* (1989), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) or *Sicko* (2007) link traditional documentary’s social concern with broadcasting journalism’s human interest. At the same time, Moore has embraced this new genre, “popular documentary”, offering entertainment movies to a wide public.

“The combination of humour, irony and satire in a documentary with clear political intent represents the kind of hybridisation which, for some, challenges the ethical claims of the whole documentary project” (Dovey, 2000:36).

Purist documentarists critique these filmmakers because they are perceived to have moved away from documentary’s “sobriety” tradition (Nichols, 1991). Is it an elitist theory? It might be considered like that because usually pure documentary is not a democratic genre. To understand some of these films, the viewer should have a high level of audiovisual culture that not all the population get. Nevertheless, these hybrids formats are easier (and more democratic) to understand and that is why they have

become so popular. Currently, “popular documentaries” are already part of television and media culture.

Truth behind the camera

“Documentary realism is not only a style but also a professional code, an ethic, and a ritual” (Nichols, 1991:166).

Some people would consider the documentary is closer to the truth than reality TV. This idea is based on the fact that reality programmes usually “create situations that would not have existed so that observational programme makers can shoot them” (Bignell, 2005:68). However, this way of making “real movies” was part of the earlier documentary tradition too.

American Direct Cinema and French Cinema Verité have influenced Reality TV. While “direct cinema approach refused the possibility of reconstruction and staging”; “the French tradition of cinema verité acknowledges the intervention of the filmmaker” (Bignell, 2005:68).

Reality TV shows practice both of these principles but is more common to find stage scenarios than real ones. Hence, when the Big Brother producers stage the candidate’s house they are creating a new reality, an invented one, based on real everyday life. Television studio was traditionally used in “low-budget drama, performance staged for television (like variety shows), current affairs and discussion programmes” but nowadays, as Bignell points, shows like Big Brother are “in effect a studio-shot

programme” (Bignell, 2005:69). However, it is not necessary a negative factor if we considered that the prize-winning documentary *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) is partially a studio-shot film too.

“Documentaries do not present the truth but a truth (or, better, a view or way of seeing), even if the evidence they recruit bears the authentication trace of the historical world itself”.
(Nichols, 1991:118)

We live in the era of new celebrities, “people like us” are the main characters of “daytime quiz and talk shows, though mid-evening consumer, lifestyle, and light entertainment slots to the numerous *vérité*-style documentary programmes based upon ‘ordinary people’s’ lives” (Dovey, 2000:104). When viewers watch “real people” on TV they have the illusion that if they (ordinary people) are famous they could become celebrities too. But the reality is just a very small percentage of the audience will have the chance to appear on television.

Some people actually achieve the “fifteen minutes of fame” that the father of the Pop Art, Andy Warhol, defended. They get it appearing on talk or quiz shows but it is just an ephemeral kind of fame very different for that one reached by persons who became celebrities thanks to reality shows like Big Brother or Survivor. However, many of this ordinary people converted into celebrities are puppets used by popular media. For example, the 12th edition winner of the Spanish Big Brother, Laura Campos, was recently humiliated on the TV programme La Noria when a journalist proved the lack of intelligence in Big Brother’s candidates asking her how many countries were in the

Iberian Peninsula, Laura's answer was "none". Next day, the piece of news was in every national media opening the debate of how relevant is the cultural level in these new celebrities.

The Big Brother Experience

"Big Brother was marketed at first as an experiment about how human society works, with the contestants like rats trapped in a laboratory maze" (Bignell, 2005:118).

When George Orwell wrote *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949) he could have never imagined that his totalitarian imaginary society would actually become real in the following decades. "Big Brother is watching you", is the famous quote from the book and the phrase that title the most relevant reality programme of TV History: Big Brother.

However, this social experiment was just the beginning of the ordinary people who became celebrities. "In reality TV, the distinction between an ordinary person and a celebrity is manipulated, and one term can turn into the other" (Bignell, 2005:91).

The original idea of Big Brother came in 1997 from John de Mole. It was produced by Endemol, his own Production Company, and shown in Netherland in 1999. The Big Brother phenomenon was a gold mine so successful that in the following years the format was copied, produced and shown in more than 70 different countries all around the world.

As well as most of the countries, first edition of Big Brother in Spain was marketed as a serious social experiment. Physiologists, sociologists and journalists analyzed this format dividing the society in two camps: those ones who were in favour of the show, and those ones who rejected it.

Is this increase of reality shows negative for the society? It would be considered an alarming fact because television is losing its public sphere concern. The most critical ones consider they are creating a new infantilized audience based on banality and triviality.

In Spain, Big Brother has recently finished its 12th edition in addition to reach a 24 hours TV channel. This is a good example of audience's preferences and demands. Before the end of 2010 this TV channel used to be the Spanish CNN. Thinking in business terms, Sogecable (the company which owns several Spanish TV licenses) sold the CNN license in order achieve a more profitable product. The result was the 24 hours Big Brother channel. However, it is important to remark that during its first broadcasting week this channel got lower audience percentages than the previous 24 hours CNN. That reveals audience is interested in other people's lives but just when those lives are edited, when there is a component of drama in them.

“In representing this apparently homogenous middle, docusoap both offers a realism of reflection but also contributes to the poverty of analytical political discourses that might intervene and transform it” (Bignell, 2005:67)

It is important to remark that many of these viewers actually believe that Big Brother is a programme based on reality. But, is it? What is real and what is staged in programmes like Big Brother? According to Bignell, “Big Brother combines the aesthetic of observing ordinariness in the film documentary tradition with the staging of action for the purposes of shooting that comes from drama” (Bignell, 2005:70).

If documentaries characters are “social actors (...), individuals [who] represents themselves to others” (Nichols, 1991:42), should we call reality show’s candidates “social actors” too? In both situations they are constructing a performance based in their own experience. Therefore, if we rename ordinary people who appear on the screen as “actors” we should assume that documentary and reality TV are strongly influenced by drama and fiction formats.

We could say first edition of Big Brother was based on reality but its following editions were charged of drama components. Editors build storylines and arguments using their 24 hours footage. Most of the audience (those one who does not watch the 24 hours Big Brother channel) just received edited information based on the interests of producers instead of real authenticity. Even it is part of observational documentary heritage, the differences between both genres fall on its ethical and aesthetic impact.

Conclusion

Reality TV’s popularity is based on the human condition. We love to judge, criticise and get on well with other human beings. It is part of our society and it is not

necessary a negative factor. However, we have reached a level of ordinariness on television that it goes beyond the ethics.

Are all reality shows a bad influence for people? According to Bignell, reality programmes like docusoap “offers a realism of reflection but also contributes to the poverty of analytical political discourses that might intervene and transform it” (Bignell, 2005:67). It might be true, but people also demand entertainment as a way of relaxing and they use it as an escape route from their own problems and routine. Many of these programmes as well as many “popular documentaries” achieve this social function.

“In fiction, realism serves to make a plausible world seem real; in documentary, realism serves to make an argument about the historical world persuasive” (Nichols, 1991:165).

Current society demands triviality on television and audience find it on reality TV programmes. But the question is, are these shows actually real? Quoting Nichols, “documentaries are fictions with plots, characters, situations, en event like an other” (1999:107). In some cases, this theory is interchangeable with reality TV. Reality shows like Big Brother offers an edited version of what is really happening in the house. Professional scriptwriters create plots with the house’s candidates and editors build them in the editing room. Even these shows are based on ordinary people lives sometimes they are not very realistic. However, if there is a dangerous thing on reality TV shows that audience will not find on documentaries is, especially in docusoaps,

the illusion they create on the audience. Some of these programmes reflect people do not need to make any effort to achieve popularity and earn money.

“In docusoap, the dividing lines between television and everyday reality, programme and audience, celebrity and ordinariness, are fine lines which can easily be crossed”
(Bignell, 2005:67)

To conclude, reality TV fulfils a social function based on entertains population. Hybrids formats are an example of these new trends, modifying the documentary genre as we traditionally have understood it. Even there are people who demand triviality and superficiality on TV, there will always be an audience interested in other kind of formats. For this reason, we could affirm that documentary genre will never die.

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