

Television: between continuities and transformations

*Fernanda Maurício Silva*¹

FREIRE FILHO, João; BORGES, Gabriela (ed.).
Estudos de televisão: diálogos Brasil-Portugal.
Porto Alegre: Sulina, 2011, 407p.

Abstract

The changes in the television landscapes of Brazil and Portugal—the privatization of public channels, the formation of new genres, and the influence of digital technologies—are addressed in the anthology *Estudos de televisão: diálogos Brasil-Portugal*, edited by João Freire Filho and Gabriela Borges. The book is structured around the analysis of television programs of different genres and formats and modes of representation of the individual and the multitude, and the theoretical and methodological challenges posed for the analysis of this medium. By strengthening the dialogue between different authors, theoretical perspectives and television cultures, this book gives a good portrayal of the growth of research in the area of television and offers some guidelines for addressing the various forms and contents that make up contemporary television.

Keywords: television; analysis of television products; representations; theoretical and methodological challenges

In its sixty years, Brazilian television has strengthened itself as a cultural industry and appears to have consolidated a program schedule based on entertainment, with frequent discussions on the quality of its products and appealing largely to the mass market. In Portugal, like the rest of Europe, television first emerged as a public initiative, focusing on education, information, and entertainment. However, after the 1990s, it went through a process of commercialization. Due to these distinctions between the public and private models, the experiences of the television industry in both countries can offer a rich exchange of knowledge on the production and consumption of audiovisual products.

Therefore, the initiative of João Freire Filho and Gabriela Borges in bringing together researchers in the area of television from Brazil and Portugal is opportune for discussing—in an international seminar held at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and the University of Algarve—the discursive, technological, and aesthetic characteristics and trends involving contemporary television. The results of the discussions that took place in the seminar have been published in the collection *Estudos*

de televisão: diálogos Brasil–Portugal. It is organized in two parts and has thirteen articles written by leading Brazilian and Portuguese researchers in the area of television.

The central theme of the first part is the analysis of programs belonging to different genres and formats—such as studio shows, television news, fiction series, and reality show—and the ways in which the individual and the multitude are represented on television. Particularly notable is the range of theoretical and methodological focuses that have been used for analysis. Semiotics, sociology, notions of field and authorship, and cultural studies have created an fruitful environment for reflection on expressive aspects of television. Through these focuses, the authors offer a comprehensive approach on television, which takes into account the specific features of the programs, the modes of production and construction of recognition of the authors of the audiovisual works, the forms of representation, and the configurations of the genres.

A theme that pervades the analyses is the constant presence of the common person on television, which, on reality shows, incorporates “a profound expectation of collectivity” for seeing emotions and relationships that are authentic, not acted out. In the case of television news, the common people, or the masses, appear as a horizon of representations and interlocution for the development of journalism values. In Brazil, the economic growth of social class C has led broadcasters to reformulate their television news programs. They have added criminal news to the program schedule or reinvented the traditional forms of presenting news, which in recent years, have shifted their focus away from teleprompter and towards improvisation and dialog with guests as the preferred format. In Portugal, the news programs seek to highlight the role of the people in the streets as an expression of their political struggles, whether for better working conditions—such as in the general teachers’ strike that took place in Portugal in 2008—or in the crowds of demonstrators in Tahrir Square in Cairo, in 2011, which led to the downfall of the dictator, Hosni Mubarak.

Beyond the thematic differences and theoretical references that permeate the collection, history is clearly seen as an important element for discussing contemporary TV. Arlindo Machado recalls Chacrinha’s studio show to discuss the effects of

¹ PhD and professor at Universidade Federal da Bahia. With a CNPq scholarship.

improvisation and spontaneity that configure the live broadcast. João Freire Filho offers a genealogy of reality shows to talk about authenticity as an intrinsic value of expectations about the genre. He also recalls the popular studio shows of the 1980s to distinguish the treatment of the common citizen in these programs and in contemporary reality shows. Eduardo Cintra shows how the political multitude was treated differently in the television coverage, from the student demonstrations of May 1968 in France, to the more recent demonstrations in Cairo. The changes in framing are the result of a transformation in the field of television news, which has imposed a balanced coverage in which government and protestors were given voice in the news. The need to look into the past in order to understand the present indicates the historical nature of this medium and its transformation process, whether in its technological context, the format of the programs, the reception competences, or the way it represents the common citizen.

It is due to this changing scenario that television lacks a theoretical and methodological instrument that encompasses its objects. This theme is dealt with in the second part of *Estudos de televisão*. The editors' concern with this issue is admirable. Despite the importance of TV in the formation of consumer habits, the representation of identities, and the construction of portrayals of society, there has been little discussion among Brazilian academics of the theoretical and methodological references adopted for its comprehension. The authors of this compilation offer critical observations on the methods used, and point out methodologies for analyzing television products and forms of reception of social groups, such as social classes and child viewers.

The growing influence of digital technology configures a new way of doing, receiving, and researching television. In Brazil, the model of digital television adopted, a theme that has been little discussed in academic circles, can provide greater variety of content, establishing itself based on the current practices of television viewing and on the notion of flow. The media convergence, instead of decreeing the death of TV, points to new forms of consuming it, modifying choices, tastes, and groups of belonging among television viewers.

In Portugal, the context that is most clearly outlined is the reconfiguration of the public service, since public televisions are migrating towards the digital system of the

European model, and the concession of RTP2, the second Portuguese public channel, has passed to civil society, which should be organized to manage a schedule of programs aimed at educating, informing, and entertaining. As a result, researchers and society have established new parameters for determining the quality of products, based on the European cultural diversity and on democratic values, such as the free expression of ideas, public debate, and political participation.

The book offers a good portrayal of the growth of research in the field of television. It is evident in institutions like the following: Intercom (Brazilian Society for Interdisciplinary Studies on Communication), with its Working Groups *Television and Video*, and *Serial Fiction and Journalism*; Compós (National Association of Graduate Programs in Communication), with its Working Group *Television Studies*, set up in 2010; and SOPCOM (Portuguese Association for Communication Science), which in 2009 set up the Working Group *Television Studies*. Also, the organization of the seminars, colloquia, and meetings to discuss the new routes taken by television have demonstrated the visibility that this medium has gained in the academic world, and the challenges that researchers still face, when analyzing the multiple themes contained within it. By strengthening the dialog between different authors, theoretical perspectives, and television cultures, *Estudos de televisão* offers some guidelines for contemplating the “thousands of forms and diverse, opposing, creative, repetitive, innovative contents” found in TV, contributing to qualifying still further the debate on this “myriad of possible readings” that television is.