

## Input and discourses on quality television

Founded in 1978, Input is an annual weeklong television showcase that takes place each May in a different city. By screening and debating the most outstanding programs from around the world, INPUT has been constituted as the only international conference that focuses specifically on the innovation and creation of programs produced by public as opposed to commercial broadcasters. As a promoter of discussion with critical emphasis on the role of the producer and broadcaster as socially responsible communicators, and as a generator of a communication flow among different cultures and ways of understanding television, Input constitutes an ideal framework for production, and subsequently analysis of discourses around quality television.

### Objectives

This study has dual objectives. Firstly it aims to analyse from an evolutionary point of view the discourses on quality television generated in the framework of the conference by the estimated 1000 television professionals gathered together during a week. The second aim is of a formal nature and consists of analysing how these discourses play a fundamental role in the daily reproduction of ideologies. Taking into account that prestige and critical validity are automatically conferred to Input, and considering that, just as Pujadas (2001) asserts, discourses on quality television constitute a form of symbolic power exercise, we will try to define which is the way, if exists, by which this group is consolidated as such and somehow, generates a situation of ideological domination.

### Methodology

Conversations generated in every small session planned along the week would have probably constituted a more interesting object of study. However, because of the absence of a systematic and rigorous collection of this material, we have decided to analyse some of the texts collected in the official catalogue by the respective edition organisation committee and distributed to all the conference participants. Considering that there is some kind of human tendency (especially in academic and professional environments) to reflection when a new decade begins, the sample selected is comprised of texts from the catalogues of 1981<sup>st</sup> edition, held in Venice (Italy), of 1990<sup>th</sup> edition, held in Edmonton (Canada), and of 2000<sup>th</sup> edition, held in Halifax (Canada). Although reflections included in 1990<sup>th</sup> and 2000<sup>th</sup> catalogues are abundant and productive, because of content limitations in 1980<sup>th</sup> catalogue (it is a simple collection of program technical files), we have chosen the one from 1981<sup>st</sup>, as an example of interests, fears and expectations generated towards the 80's from the recent experience of the 70's (not through Input, but through other preceding conferences as Grand Prix Italy).

From all the assembly of documents conforming the various Input editions' catalogues, our sample collects: the opening texts (welcoming letters and texts focused on the edition's main topic), the special debate session (without screening) texts, and the summary texts for every session<sup>1</sup>.

As we have mentioned, our study has a dual objective. To reach them we have used two different but complementary methods. Firstly we adopt the categorization proposed by Eva Pujadas (2001) in her doctoral thesis on discourses on quality television<sup>2</sup>. According to Pujadas, we need to distinguish four different dimensions in discourses on quality television: the quality of television system, the quality of television programming, the quality of television channel and the quality of programs. From these four general categories and including all the subcategories specified by the author in her investigation, we have elaborated an analysis protocol whose application will allow us to observe frequencies by which analyzed discourses can be located in one dimension or another, as well as to get into some kind of systematization of the notion of quality built in the conference's context.

On the other hand, in order to achieve our second objective, and as an added reflection tool, we will apply what has been called Critical Discourse Analysis<sup>3</sup> (CDA). The objective of CDA is, as van Dijk (2000) asserts, the study of how discourse contributes to the reproduction of inequality and social injustice by determining who accedes discourse and communication structures accepted and legitimized by the group. Van Dijk defines elites' power as a discourse power, therefore it is through communication that takes place what is called "manufacture of consent": a discourse control of linguistic acts through persuasion, a contemporary form of exercising power.

If it's through discourse study (investigation's fundamental objective), that we can come to understand the mechanisms by which dominant groups are able to control other groups' acts, to define who can speak, when and on what, then CDA can be applied to discourses on quality television since we detect some kind of

<sup>1</sup> We have dispensed with individual program summary texts because of its of narrative synopsis nature

<sup>2</sup> Pujadas, Eva, (2001). *Els Discursos sobre la "televisió de qualitat". Àmbits de referència i perspectives d'anàlisi*. Doctoral thesis directed by Xavier Ruiz Collantes. Barcelona: UPF, Estudis de Periodisme i Comunicació Audiovisual

<sup>3</sup> CDA must be understood as a Discourse Studies speciality, focused on the investigation of social inequality and power, and the way by which these realities become evident through language. After some years of research on this field, Teun A. van Dijk and other European investigators are focusing on a concrete objective and, trying to make their work in a more rigorous and scientific way, they name and develop their theories in the framework of CDA.

symbolic power exercise in them. Our analysis protocol<sup>4</sup> - which has been applied to the sample not already in a rigorous and systematic way, but as an attention guideline-, will consider the following levels: semantic meaning, propositional structures, morphology, sentence syntax, forms of discourse and argumentation and rhetoric.

## Conclusions

### **From Pujadas' protocol application**

Input, as its official web proclaims, exists to give exposure to programs for they own merit, without regard to national pride or commercial interest. Therefore, it becomes evident that the most present discourse in INPUT relates quality television to programs' quality. In fact, programs' protagonism becomes evident not only in the conference, but also in the catalogue, where they are the main unit of analysis.

References to the system's scope can be mainly located in opening texts. Thus, while screening materials tend to promote debate focused on the product intrinsic characteristics, we can associate discourses on system's quality (in cultural and basically political terms) to a will of the organization to locate the quality product in a global framework of the system. Input's status as a conference where the best programs broadcasted by public television channels are shown, shows discourses on television system necessary as a construction of the context where products are inserted. According to that, it is important to mention that discourses on system's quality expressed in economic terms (especially present in the last edition analyzed) can be exclusively (and meaningfully) found in debate sessions without prior screening.

On the other side, we have observed a residual presence of discourses on television channel quality as well as on television programming quality, which can probably be explained by the conference politics according to which a program is considered despite its origin of emission and production (except by questions related to plurality).

Whatever it might be the abundance of discourses on some specific fields, the analysis of the three editions' selected texts has allowed us to verify the existence of a global coherence in the festival's approach. Although themes and forms possibly change from one edition to another, dialogues proposed -whatever category in which they are located-, are focused on the same general topics. Thus, not only can we affirm that concern about television remain the same, but also that the festival has acquired the knowledge to built some kind of "brand image" that puts it beyond social trends and current audiovisual prevailing tendencies.

So based on the obtained results, Input's program quality criteria can be summarized in two ideas, corresponding to each of the two levels that Pujadas (2001) specifies in her thesis. On one hand, at an internal level, there is a prevailing tendency to emphasize the appraisal of experimentation in processing the content relating to the form (through genre mixture, through new approaches to subjects, through exploration of new languages,...). On the other hand, at an external level, Input appreciates above all programs with a descriptive and informative will, and with a critical attitude regarding what they are narrating.

At the same time, and concerning to the system, we detect a trend in the definition of quality, on one side in cultural, economic, and political terms (democratization of the system, promotion of audiovisual market, questions of national identity, ...), on the other side, as a result of the action of some professionals gathered in the festival with exchange experiences and ideas to, thus, improve their projects.

Nevertheless, Input's editorial project with regard to quality television, consolidated through discourse constants that this study is intended to detect, can be understood not only from the common presence of elements, but also from its absence. The omission of some discourses which other institutions related to television production usually hold, (specifically the one that makes reference to quality depending on audience measurement) should be conceived as a conscious form of social and cultural differentiation with regard to other coexistent discourse centres with wider influence and, therefore, less related to intellectual elites.

Apart from the numerous coincidences in absences and presences of discourses, there are some differences, minimum but not therefore less important, that cannot be ignored. In the first place, 1981<sup>st</sup> edition differs from the others because of a politicization related to a system level, as well as to a program level. While introductory discourses are focused on subjects like public television mission's of national cohesion or cultural patrimony of conservation; in the chapter devoted to programs (catalogue's second part), most of the selected themes inside which products are framed, especially and meaningfully refer to its informative and descriptive ability. In the second place, 1990<sup>th</sup> edition lays great stress on television channels, not so much referring to its quality, as making reference to its increasing (in quantity and typology) as a context in which programs produced and missions to fulfil must be reconsidered. Finally, the 2000<sup>th</sup> edition proposes some topics under the title "*Television on the edge*". Full of warning connotations, the main slogan especially refers to the economic context and to its possible influence on the quality of television programs. The Discourses collected in the 2000<sup>th</sup> catalogue (mostly found in opening texts and almost never in program session summaries) debate about technology not only as an immediate environment to keep in mind, but also as a direct determining variable of program form and content in the future.

We know that it is impossible to turn each of the selected editions into a paradigmatic example of its corresponding decade. Even so, we can affirm that discourses on quality generated in INPUT perpetrate very

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<sup>4</sup> Protocol extracted from "Ideology and discourse. A Multidisciplinary Introduction", synopsis of the same title work edited by UOC in 2000.

specific lines of positioning which probably act as mechanisms of reproduction of dominant ideology. Although they have suffered slight variations depending on their context of production, they must be conceived as a slow way of consolidating a specific way of thinking on what is quality television: a public television model formed by programs, whose quality should serve to improve the global quality of the media.

### **From CDA application**

Considering that we have applied CDA on the selected sample in a functional and extension limited way, conclusions immediately exposed should consequently be understood as a complement to results exposed up to now (which constitute the main body of our investigation). While the application of the analysis protocol extracted from Pujadas (2001) is intended to systematize the notions of quality, utilization of CDA tries to establish a relation between discourses on quality and a specific type of symbolic power exercises. Through the study of texts' discourse structures, we attempted to detect and to show the existence of some reproduction mechanisms of group ideology. Having observed a prevailing trend to appraise quality of programs and its creators, and of a public television system and its programming schedule, our purpose consisted on defining how these notions of quality are articulated, and how they are institutionalized through an official written document (Input's catalogue).

We can summarize the conclusions obtained in two fundamental lines:

- The construction of the notion of quality. The notion of quality, which becomes a central concept in the conference, is built and transported through discourse organizers whether by means of constant repetition of the objectives, purposes and privileges of the contest, or through quality (grammar and lexical correction) of the discourse that justifies it. Style marks state not only in the program selection and, therefore, in the practical construction of "quality", but also in the festival official text (and discourse) and, therefore, in the theoretical construction of the notion of quality (and of the group that holds it). The most used resources are: (1) vocabulary wealthy related to emotion and to creation (both associated to quality of selected programs); (2) courtesy provided by constant use of what van Dijk calls "disclaimers" (which serve as a form of positive self representation), by depersonalization (implicit agent) of organizers positive actions (which implies some kind of false modesty); and (3) moderation of arguments in favour of a suggestive tone, not so much provocative as inspiring, reached through a rhetoric of questions and proverbial sentences, both also characteristic of most of the selected programs.
- The function of legitimacy. Although festival's function of self-legitimacy (and therefore, of recognition of a notion of quality) can be mainly located in introductory texts, the whole catalogue in its totality pursues, in a more or less explicit way, the self-affirmation of the group and its corresponding ideology relating to quality television. By constantly using the personal pronoun "we" and its corresponding possessive one, and by presenting an extremely subtle "they" in form and in name of a negative context where the "ours" is a commendable objective, a feeling of community is built and consolidated; a feeling of collectivity with a specific shared purpose whose reach is difficult, only possible through creation. However, this distribution and quantification of participating actors (typical from texts related to the ideological square that proposes van Dijk and, therefore, reflecting some kind of domination situation) is not the only way of group's legitimating. The constant repetition of the objective "quality" in this or in other terms also consolidates and legitimizes a group's attitude and that one of the festival in which this group gathers.

Working on the hypothesis according to which Input catalogue's two main functions are the construction of a notion of quality and its legitimating process (as well as the recognition of the group that creates it), is important, as a final reflection, to add a third variable extracted from the sample: the volume of texts. In fact, turns out to be interesting to observe that in the three analyzed editions there is a progressive growth in the volume of documents dedicated to the mentioned functions. Although it seems to be that it is just in its origin when a festival needs the hardest a discourse legitimating part, in the three years studied we can observe an inverse tendency. From first editions' texts we can gather the presence of an elitist attitude and an especial emphasis on the objectives "all of we" try to achieve. However, it is expressed in a more rigorous, serious, and economic way. On the other hand, 2000<sup>th</sup>'s catalogue, as in subsequent editions, includes a greater volume of texts and figures since these are generated. Legitimating process originates then in more personages, from different professional positions, and with discourses that focus on quality practically in the same terms, but from different points of view. The increase of volume, together with an observed growth of the rhetorical forms used, leads us to think that nowadays there is a greater need of reasserting the project's legitimacy and of explaining of the concept of "television quality", possibly now more than ever, liable to suffer the damaging effects derived from -each day more complex and unknown- agents and factors.

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#### Catàlegs:

INPUT: Venice, Italy, March 22-29, 1981

INPUT: Edmonton, Canada, May 20-26, 1990.

INPUT: Halifax, Canada, May 14-20, 2000