

Cultural Studies and Quality Television

The aim of this article is to try to find a notion of quality in Cultural Studies' discourses about television. Even if Cultural Studies are an "undisciplined discipline" (as Ien Ang puts it) and thus hard to define, one can find a common way to study and conceptualise television, that has been largely influential. But, which are the consequences of such a tradition in 'quality television' discourses?

First of all the text tries to describe Cultural Studies' approach to television. Under the works of three major researchers such as Stuart Hall, John Fiske and Ien Ang (limited to a concrete corpus), the article explores the notions of reception and popular culture, terms that are somehow repressed when we talk about quality.

The article concludes trying to use their arguments to discuss the discourse of 'quality television'.

Hall, Fiske and Ang on TV: reception and popular culture

Hall's *Encoding/decoding* Model is still the seminal work in reception studies. Its goal is "to interrupt that sort of transparent notion of communication". Hall views communication not as a univocal vector, but as an articulation of distinct moments (each one with his own influences). As a consequence, we cannot talk about a necessary equivalence between codification and decodification, where the meaning is finally constructed. But even if there's a power in reading, Hall doesn't forget that there is not a complete freedom in it. First of all because there is a dominant ideology where the text is inscribed (and, in the first formulation of the Encoding/decoding model, inevitably produced by); and secondly because there is a "preferred reading" as a textual property. To Hall it is important not only to discuss dominant ideology with the reading power but also to restore an enunciate from meaning to its potential (the unfinished semiosis that Hall assigns to language as opposed to its interruption, that he calls ideology).

Hall's model is a report from a battlefield. Reception is a struggle for meaning (or against any meaning in its radical formulation). This is also the landscape of popular culture. That is not *in* any particular form, but in its *relation* against dominant culture. The space of culture is not a predetermined field where we can express ourselves, but a space to be constructed everyday.

John Fiske accepts both ideas of Hall (reception as construction of the meaning and culture as a force field) as his basic assumption. He adds another fundamental concept: the split between cultural economy and financial economy. In cultural economy one the

objects of circulation are not commodities but meanings and pleasures (which are not under the rules of private property). Then, concludes Fiske, their mechanisms are distinct and so must be their evaluation and study.

By no means we should understand this division as an autonomization of the cultural field: culture is related to society. Produced the reception process, we can make sense of it only in relation to our everyday life. And as a consequence “the attempt to produce a culture for others (...) can never be finally successful, for culture can only be produced from within, not from outside”.

In the force field of culture Fiske understands heterogeneity as an attack against dominant culture (which pretends to be stable). This is a fundamental attribute of popular culture. But Fiske goes further, and pretends that television presents some characteristics that help to create the conditions for an heterogeneous reception. Some of this are: continuous flux, intertextuality, vanishing of the author and semiotic excess. Finally, Fiske has constructed a reflection on the epistemology of television studies. His analyses are systemic and not statistical: the practices are valuable as an actualisation of a system (as in the linguistic pair: langue – parole), and then the margins are worthy as they reveal extreme and unexpected possibilities of the system. The last base of such an epistemology is political: heterogeneity not as a liberal ideal but as an oppositional force working for social change.

Ien Ang turns to the global conditions of reception (even macrostructural ones), to avoid identifying psychological causes (*Watching Dallas* is not only a study of reception but a study on the “threat of Americanisation”) or giving reception a messianic power against all domination. Ang also demands a conscience of “radical contextualism”, even in the research itself.

Ang adds two new central concepts on popular culture: mass culture ideology and populism ideology. The first one qualifies mass culture as negative (without contents, stereotypical, industrial mode of production...). Discourses on mass culture products always refer to this ideology as a common ground, using it as it is or rather trying to negotiate with it (that means undoing its ascription to mass culture: “it has a content”, “its stereotypes are ironical”, etc.). Instead, populism ideology refuses any value which does not come from personal taste (without needing any other justification), and uses “pleasure” as its main attribute (as a personal and untheorizable base). The split between both ideologies is the discursive ground of mass culture ideology against the practical ground of populism ideology (that is the first one affects the opinions explicitly expressed on tv, and the second one the practices).

Is there any ‘quality’ in cultural studies?

In the research mentioned above, the notion of quality seems to fade out. Its absence is somehow an attribute of Cultural Studies' relation to television. Maybe only Charlotte Brunsdon has asked herself about quality; making explicit the difficulties of an aesthetic approach to television, due to the lack of codifying categories such as "text" or "mode of address".

But even if they are not explicit, there are consequences of 'quality' in the research of Hall, Fiske and Ang. First of all their discourses act *against* some assumptions on 'quality'. Reception studies erodes any aesthetics based on the unity "artist-work-spectator". The split between cultural and financial economy denies the collapse of mode of production and cultural value (as is in the classical critique to cultural industries). But the most questioned aspect is quality in relationship with contents. Not only because one cannot assure its transmission, but also because, as Fiske says, culture is constructed from within.

We could find some, basically constructed on a political ground. If culture is a struggle field, opposition to dominant culture is a criterion for quality. That opposition is produced basically in the reception (even if Fiske defines some textual strategies used by popular texts); not in a kind of audience (as it's neither in the text) but in the specific answer. Another criterion stands up under the category "pleasure" (ecstatic, against domination, etc.). Both of them (reception and pleasure) are tangible and even quantifiable (not in absolute terms but in comparative ones) but they can not be previously specified, nor subject to repetition. We have then a criterion for quality that seems paradoxically irreducible that escapes any previous or later control, but anyhow present and lived.

This notion of quality doesn't ignore the role and responsibility of the producer in TV communication nor delegates it to the audience, but tries to place it in its greatest structure without forgetting any of its articulations, and then as a complex and social process.