

A Sociological Analysis of Television

Lin Fan

I-Shou University

No.1, Sec. 1, SyuechengRd. Dashu District

Kaohsiung City 84001. Taiwan

ABSTRACT

New genres of programmes appeared on French television in the 2000s. They shaped people's relations to entertainment, and to a certain extent the nature of their interests. TV redefined itself under the influence of foreign channels. Until then, France had harshly defended its cultural autonomy; but American formats eventually made their way into the media to become mainstream. Why were these broadcasts so successful? Had viewers been looking forward to enjoying them? This paper discusses whether reality television has reflected an evolution of French ethics. A selection of three French broadcasts is scrutinized in this regard – a quiz show (The Weakest Link), a talk show (My Own Decision) and a reality show (Loft Story). These shows reveal aspects of the ways in which television acts upon mentalities. They also threaten, according to sociological studies of the media, the quality of cultural production – in science and in the arts, in philosophy or in law – as well as democracy and political life at large.

Keywords: Reality TV, France, society, gaze, ethics.

1.1. Money for nothing

In the summer of 2000, a brand-new television game aired on French screens. A former radio presenter, Laurence Boccolini, hosted *The Weakest Link*. The game opposed ten players who did their best to answer questions, with each correct answer increasing the amount of money that only one individual would receive. The winner was named "the strongest link". Boccolini theatrically created an atmosphere of suspense, cruelty and uncanny suspicion. At the end of a round of basic questions, it was up to the players to designate the "weakest link". At that moment they all wrote the name of the contestant they believed was not good enough. Every now and again Boccolini repeated the same sentences in a dramatic tone (e.g. "It is now time to vote and eliminate...the *weakest link*"). After leaving the television set, each loser shot in close-up told the camera how she felt during the game, her disappointment or anger, and the person he would like to see eliminated at the end of the next round.

1.2. Diplomacy

The Weakest Link was not an ordinary quiz show, because denunciation and a soft form of sadism are inscribed in its rules. The objective was less about getting richer than reaching a state of glory. This peculiar form of glory constituted a revolution in French television. Viewers were used to associate glory with cultural zeal, with knowledge; but that reached in the *Weakest Link* was almost the opposite of the latter. It became the result of complex relationships based on instinct and luck. Boccolini always asked the players to justify their choice, to explain why they chose *this* player rather than another. As such a choice could not be guided by Kantian rationality (Kant, 1781/1787), participants had to make up a reason (e.g. "I don't like her shirt"). This option could be called "the option of realism", which was riskier but smarter than random choice. It was more important to be *perceived* by the other contestants as a knowledgeable, to imitate attitudes of wisdom and make sure everybody noticed how friendly you were. The implicit goal was therefore to have a rough impression about a person you did not know anything about, as in the "guess who" game. This game therefore epitomized what Bourdieu (1996) called "fast thinking", as opposed to the slower, real process of thinking.

1.3. Let the wolf be the strongest

The Weakest Link is in this way an instinctive game characterized by "fast thinking". In order to reach as many people as possible, questions must deal with popular culture. The show assumed that viewers did not like to be challenged. It assumed that they preferred to watch a quiz show in which they could answer most questions. The target was not culture anymore; it was satisfaction with oneself, pride, nay vanity. Revenge and arrogance would lead to triumph. La Fontaine (1652) wrote after Greek thinkers that "the opinion of the strongest is always the best one". *The Weakest Link* made the credo true: culture was no longer to be valued, as long as you are motivated and confident enough. As a result, the main spirit of the game leads us to thinking about capitalism. Promotion for the spirit of capitalism had penetrated French television in more subtle ways than traditional advertising. Viewers were watching the end of the Enlightenment, and the end of Romanticism altogether. They were witnessing the opening of an era of diplomacy, tactics, and management.

2.1. Democratic choice

Talk shows were a rather new phenomenon in 2000s France. *My Own Decision* was a talk show that emerged a little earlier than *The Weakest Link*. It introduced six or seven nobodies who talked about their lives and interacted with the host and even the audience. Bourdieu (1996) stresses that television should invite people who have something to say. Yet most of the time, guests have nothing interesting

to say. *My Own Decision* displayed the topic of the day at the bottom of the screen, a permanent subtitle: “I hate blondes”, “I can do extraordinary things with my body”, and the like. According to Habermas (1989), a talk show has the potential to become “a philosophy of discourse essential to democracy”. It can engage the public by providing the space for a potentially egalitarian public discussion –one that evaluates contribution and allows participation to the debate, based not on expertise, power, or wealth, but on civic involvement. That is why the emergence of the public sphere is essential to the ideal of a democratic system, because it functions to give everyone a voice. So television is in theory capable of reproducing an Agora in miniature, although it is clear that Socrates was not used to discuss democracy via debates around the respective beauty of blondes and brunettes. *My Own Decision* carried in this way the *potential* for democratic debate.

My Own Decision responded to the need for a public forum on issues of common concern, but it failed to connect personal experience with the larger socio-economic context. Therefore it could not help individuals understand their own lives in relation to the social, political, and economic forces that acted upon them. Instead of understanding and knowledge, *My Own Decision* offered viewers the voyeuristic pleasure of gazing into the private lives of society’s victims. But once again the show was successful, because topics that were close to people’s everyday lives were better valued. Personal interest was celebrated and much stronger on television than values and virtues. Television had this power to shift French ethics toward capitalist values. A stronger form of democracy could emerge from a pale imitation of an agora where people discuss popular culture without reference to the higher arts and sciences.

2.2. Pikachu is watching you

Loft Story was broadcast in 2000 on the M6 channel. Its principle was akin to the UK *Big Brother* that made Orwellian space real. In *Loft Story* eleven unmarried men and women were spied in an isolated house, 24 hours a day, by 26 video cameras and 50 microphones. They were young and every day selected sequences of their lives were shown. These “lofters” had nothing to offer but their plain intimacy. Now the intimacy of certain exceptional people may deliver profound insights. For instance the ability to watch over an artist’s life makes us aware of some ways of living that led to creation, of what creation demands. Because writers, musicians or painters are most of the time inspired dreamers, it is worth discovering what lies beneath art, what exists before art. *Loft Story* does not deal with such lives. The lofters could be you, me, but might not be Habermas, because his thoughts are too far from popular thoughts. The lofters lived like most of us. They had showers, they ate, scrubbed the floor, brushed their teeth, washed up. *Loft Story* for the first time turned French television into a mirror. Many viewers expressed guilt at their television watching, worrying that they were addicted, that programmes were trivial, that they should have done something more active, or that the unreality of television took them away from the pleasures of the real world. Yet television seemed to describe the world as it is. As Feuer (1983) put it, there was a “liveness” attached to it. *Loft Story* was realist in that the audience was not made immediately aware of the editing process that underlied it; it preserved a certain illusion of transparency. *Loft Story* pretended that there was no author. Flaubert (1857) worked hard to make a “book about nothing”, a book where lives, perhaps boring in reality, or at first sight, become fascinating when they are read. One of his most novels even dealt with ennui – *Madame Bovary*. On television however, reality might not produce quite the same effect.

2.3. Dreams

Reality shows are a vulgar copy of what does exist in our lives. Indeed, lots of sequences are cut or hidden, and producers only show us what they want to show us. This is why, according to Bourdieu, television conceals while showing. The evolution from soap operas to trash television is telling. Before reality television, only novels, images and films made us dream. There is an argument for beauty being accessible in the most ordinary things. A sponge on the kitchen's table cannot be a piece of art; but the same sponge put on a marble column in a museum, glittering under the spotlights, has just become a piece of art. This could legitimize the existence of *Loft Story* as a programme worth watching. Television is a domestic medium. *Loft Story* can be watched in private or with relatives, and trigger conversations, enhance socialization while or after watching it. The talks in *Loft Story* have the power to generate more talks.

Conclusion

To conclude, French television is partly responsible for the evolution of French ethics. With the appearance of new genres like talk shows, specific quiz shows and reality shows – trash TV – new mentalities have emerged. A sociological study about television can be stimulating in that it makes new conceptions of a society more understandable. Living in a society is not enough to understand it.

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