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Televisão e Vídeo: Reconfigurações da Comunicação Audiovisual

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Television Obsolete, Television Absolute?

The final days of 2004 were of tragedy and sorrow. On December 26, throughout the Indian Ocean, the gigantic waves of the tsunami that followed a massive earthquake swept away coastlines and claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands, reaching as far as Madagascar or Indonesia. In the beach resort areas where Christmas tourists were equipped with affordable amateur digital or analogue camcorders and wherever there was a cell phone with a built-in video camera, people recorded an unprecedented amount of moving image clips documenting the tragic moments of the arrival of tsunami waves and the subsequent deadly destruction that followed. Even if they clearly had low image quality for television broadcast standards, those clips were, back then and by far, the main image resource of every television news report. The situation much resembled what had happened three years prior to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami when amateur video recording was massively used by television reporters while gathering image testimonials of the 9/11 plane attacks on the twin towers of New York's World

Trade Centre. Video resources were already socially abundant, but there was nothing but television to distribute them widely — which was only the case with candid camera reality TV shows or off-scale newsworthy events.

Then came YouTube.

When Paypal programmers Chad Hurley, Steve Chen and Jawed Karim created the ground-breaking video-sharing platform by February 2005, they were all still impacted by the recent events in the Indian Ocean (McFadden, 2021). Although people had easy access to the necessary tools to capture daily events, video sharing on the internet was still a highly tedious process. Hurley, Chen and Karim set themselves the task of solving the problem. The name "YouTube" meant, in its creator's minds, the television each one of us can produce and distribute (McFadden, 2021). It drew not only from the word "you" but also from the word "tube", an old technical designation of the analogue TV set built on the technology of a cathode-ray tube. Yet, at its inception, YouTube was a fully computer-based platform. Not for long, though.

The last 15 years testified not only to the multiplication of screens that could finally fulfil the promises and premises of Henry Jenkins' (2006) *convergence culture* by combining the features of the computer with the need for the best possible image of broadcast television but also to the skyrocketing rise of ubiquitous forms of production, access and viewing. The high-definition image became the standard for screen technology. Desktop computers, notebooks, tablets, smartphones, and television sets converged both as technologies and as platforms for socially shared content. High-definition built-in video cameras are now widely installed on virtually every smartphone. Digital video file formats have been evolving following the development of new software and of the internet infrastructure to allow either the caption, production, edition, and diffusion of high-definition broadcast images or the distribution of large amounts of home and self-made videos that are nevertheless able to reach high standards of image quality. Even text-based social media platforms allow for the easy upload and quick sharing of high-quality video.

The encounter between digital technologies and image gathering, production and diffusion has actually been in the making for at least four decades. Naturally, such an encounter fostered all kinds of debates, from purely technical ones to the philosophical and sociological implications involved.

When Raymond Williams (1974/2003) proposed a way of thinking television both as a *technology* and a *cultural form,* he surely advanced some quintessential ideas that formed the basis for a wide range of scientific debates around the medium, its technologies and its societal and communicational impacts. While defining *flow* as the key feature of *broadcasting*, Williams pointed out a shift in programming from *sequence* to *flow* — with a growing sense that program units were already being overrun by glueing forces such as ads but also by the combined interaction between broadcasters and viewers. Raymond Williams' proposal was grounded though on analogue television technologies, which, in a

way, explains this conceptual association between *sequence* and *flow*.

As soon as they sneaked on the horizon, digital technologies started to ignite a train of thought based on the disruption of such an association. In their 1990 article, "De la Paléo à la Neotélévision" (From Paleo to Neotelevision; Casetti & Odin, 1990), using the apparatus theory as analytical ground, Casetti and Odin (1990) had already identified a structural change in *flow* regarding the transition between the original apparatus of *paleotelevision* and the *neotelevision* apparatus: though the program grid is formally maintained as a set of sequenced schedules, it tends to dilute itself, as programming is more dispersed and programs intertwine — the next program being announced during the previous while breaks multiply inside each program to give space to commercial ads, thus diluting the sense that each program is a solid unit. Also, this increasingly self-referential television made authors such as Olson (1987) propose that *neotelevision*was actually turning into *metatelevision*.

The full digitalisation of television and the democratisation of video only added to these disruptive forces. Now it was no longer just a question of the previously observed structural changes in *flow* but of a full disruption of anything resembling *sequence* and *flow* altogether. This started emerging as soon as digital features were passed on to viewers and their daily habits. From the 1990s on, thinkers and researchers alike were already admitting to *post television* scenarios (Piscitelli, 1995; Ramonet, 2001) or even radicalising their phrasing to critically endorse the *end of television* (Missika, 2006).

In the meantime, during the 2000s, other scholars started identifying the signs of an emerging television, fitting no longer, at least to its full extent, the features of Eco's (1983) formulation of or Casetti and Odin's (1990) extended reflections on *neotelevision*. By the second half of the decade, Scolari (2008a, 2008b) observed how television audience fragmentation and storytelling techniques had been evolving to accommodate transmedia elements. He called it "hypertelevision".

Discussions on old and new definitions of television have been abundant in the past decades, mainly due to its constant reconfiguration. At the beginning of the 2010s, researchers considered television as a medium *out of control* (Schwaab, 2013) and the socio-technological apparatus it was then installing was that of a *centripetal screen* (Lopes et al., 2012). In other words, it was showing an ability to grab and concentrate resources of all kinds, be it textual, visual and semiotic, institutional or technological to retain its centric status not only in the ordinary living-room of ordinary people but mainly as a longstanding stronghold of societal experience. And indeed, even *institutional* broadcast television has undoubtedly been able to survive all forecasts, especially those foreseeing the incoming of the perfect storm.

On the Winter 2021/2022 Eurobarometer survey (European Union, 2021), an average of 90% of European citizens still declared to watch television on a TV set at least once a week. As sure as this type of access to television content receded from 97% in 2010, a vast majority of 94% still watch television on any

screen at least once per week and 77% watch television every day on a TV set. Despite all the scientific debate that has been spiking now and then, there is no question we are still watching television after the *end of television*.

In fact, although it must be stressed that, in the 1970s, Raymond Williams (1974/2003) had already referred to a tendency towards an increased interaction between television providers and viewers, we are nowadays still able to verify a continuing resistance of the traditional *broadcast* model. Uricchio (2004) identified the remote control with the moment when the control of the *flow* began its transition from the programmer to the viewer. However, when we look at television as an apparatus, the provider still does his utmost to retain that control. With digital technologies on sight, scholars paradoxically observed these clear signs of the resilience of television as *an institution* (Caldwell, 2004) and the persistence of a *broadcast* model that manifested itself in more or less new ways (Gripsrud, 2004; Tay & Turner, 2009). These new ways surely bared some relationship to the developments of technology itself.

The unrepeatable and irretrievable nature of past television experiences has led to the adoption of new methods of production and, more significantly, distribution and consumption (Lotz, 2007). At the same time, from the audience's point of view, Television memory currently holds the key to understanding and analysing several TV phenomena these days (Gutiérrez Lozano, 2013), such as the varying popularity of certain types of programmes among different audiences and the means of sharing, discussing and exchanging material offered by new platforms in the "Netflix era" or by social networks.

It is not only video-on-demand platforms that are now encouraged to produce formats typical of analogue television, such as entertainment or reality shows. The emergence of Twitch and the rise of its live broadcasts, with channels now repeating television models, and adopting old formulas that were considered defunct and are now being "rediscovered" by younger audiences, only underlines their obvious analogies with television (Spilker et al., 2020). Hence, not even the television past can be considered buried, but a survivor in this technological storm in which television, if that is what we still call it, is still afloat.

This Issue of *Vista*

Reflecting on a media ecosystem far more complex now than ever is surely no easy task for academia. So, we feel obliged to introduce this issue of *Vista* with a *quasi*-commonsensical assumption: in no way can we propose ourselves the goal of embracing the complex whole of today's analogue and digital video and television domains. Even less the whole of its intersections and impacts on our visual culture.

Actually, we can no longer clearly define whose domains are those of video and television. The merging and intertwining of both spheres blurring each one's borders is also an often paradoxical consequence of a myriad of encounters,

separations, recombinations and reconfigurations. While on its inception, the video was mainly regarded and used as a technological resource for pre-recorded television content, it has become a world on its own: as technology, as content, as social appropriation, and as art.

Pioneering artists of the 1960s, such as Nam June Paik, Wolf Vostell, and others, were early adopters, but the technology permitting a simultaneous recording of image and sound and its deferred reproduction had been around for some years essentially for the sake of television. Notwithstanding the moving pictures languages that had already been developed within the cinematic apparatus for decades, video allowed not only the emergence of a wide array of new solutions for television production but also improved its mobility and reactive capabilities. Entertainment and news programs became mainstays of broadcast television production and assisted the deinstitutionalisation of paleotelevision (Eco, 1983).

The rest is history, or should we better say, the rest is a whole lot of different stories that have been covered by the media and analysed by academics. As much as video and television travelled a long way together, the first video-art experiments were only a preview of what was about to come. Commercial democratisation, first and foremost of the analogue video camera, and of video tape and its correspondent home player and recorder, served as antechambers to the video-flooded visual culture we live immersed in.

Our proposal is then related to a continuous need not to lose the *flow* even if we seem to be wandering in the ocean.

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Biographical Notes

Luís Miguel Loureiro has a PhD in communication sciences, specialising in the sociology of communication and information at the University of Minho in 2012. He graduated in biochemistry at the University of Coimbra in 1992. He was a journalist at RTP for 24 years, having been part, between 2015 and 2021, of the team of the investigative journalism programme *Sextaàs 9* (Friday at 9) and produced several major reports and documentaries. Between 2012 and 2021, he was a professor at Porto Lusófona University, where he directed the degree in communication sciences and the master in communication networks and technologies. He was also a member of the teaching staff of the PhD in communication studies for development and media art. Between 2008 and 2013, he was a researcher at the Communication and Society Research Centre, connected to the Centre for Research in Applied Communication, Culture,

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