EMPIRICAL RESEARCH APPLIED TO THE PRODUCTION OF FICTION FOR TELEVISION: A PROPOSAL FOR EXPERIMENTAL METHODOLOGIES

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SUMMARY

The purpose of this article is to reflect on research involving the fiction production for television and to propose study methods that will provide in-depth analysis of the processes involved in producing fiction programmes. Hitherto, the origin of TV productions as such, from their conception right through to their broadcasting, has been unprecedented as a topic within the framework of research devoted to the medium.

A programme's processes of creation, whether it be fiction, entertainment or even a reality show, involve a series of internal decisions that do not transcend the theoretical field: the choice of a script, the production and planning processes, the setting and the selection of a series of characters, real or fictitious, involve the creation of worlds that can give rise to multiple interpretations according to the use made of the elements proper to the conventions of language and different TV production techniques.

KEY WORDS

Production process, TV fiction, Experimental research

ARTICLE

Introduction

The main argument for any research of an empirical nature is observation and experimentation and, from this standpoint, it can be applied to any discipline. If we apply this methodology to investigate television, we shall find that we can respond thereby to many questions and approach different areas of study in

considerable depth. Indeed, many of the fields related to television as a medium, such as sociology, economics and history, among others, have a long tradition that has led to the development of theories and consolidated lines of research.

Despite this, it would appear that the majority of the lines of research that have as their goal the production of fiction prove to be resistant and, in this sense, deal with the study of effects, results or consequences once the programmes have been broadcast. Thus, we encounter so-called genre studies that relate features such as audience response, audio-visual narrative style and the thematic content of each production; on another level, *auteur* theories that have been inherited from the cinema and applied to TV, which find themselves facing the alternative of deciding whether the TV author makes reference to the director in accordance with European tradition, or to the producer, as defended by Anglo-Saxon publications; or the semiotic that from its standpoint tries to discover where the specific nature of television lies; and the ideological criticism known as *cultural studies*, with its lines of research that look into the roles of women, children, violence or social values, among others.

At the same time, there have been relatively few publications that focus interest on the origin of the programmes or on the different production stages required for the development of fiction. Those that do so start with a purely descriptive approach that leaves no room for reflection, but rather limits itself to outlining the different steps that have to be followed in order to set up a sequence. In this respect, there are numerous manuals that set out the essential working guidelines for a proper organisation of the tasks in hand and the chronological ordering of the different stages involved: from the initial draft of a script to the different versions that can be adapted in the light of questions of time and space; set design or the choice of setting; choosing the actors, the wardrobe, or the *atrezzo*, among many other features, are described as generic concepts without any in-depth analysis of the crucial importance that this set of apparently mechanical decisions acquires for the outcome of the final production. The majority of existing texts deal with each one of these steps almost as conventions, like a set of decisions that is implicit in the production process that lays down the working guidelines in a natural manner, without taking into consideration the fact that the their content and sum total will form the set of elements with which the staging and final planning process will have to be undertaken. And these last two stages of the process are crucial for the final result of any production.

The issue here is to find out how far the different approach to a staging process, in direct relation to the technical planning, affects the construction of the narration and, consequently, the point of view from which the fictional sequence is approached. We are not discussing here narrative points of view that are intrinsic to the script, although they obviously end up affecting the narration, but rather the point of view that can be manipulated through the positioning and shifting of the cameras and the montage of the shots that go into shaping the narration. In other words, if they have a single, clearly-defined script, how many different stories can be extracted by employing only the techniques proper to the production.

Existing research

As Newcomb (1) rightly points out, research focusing on drama production follows two main lines; observation, on the one hand, and on the other, interviews with professionals in the field. It would appear that, so far, the best way of getting to know the inside story behind the creation process has been to approach the medium and the professionals working in it. In this respect, three works cited by the author as representative of three different research approaches are worth mentioning. Firstly, a starting off point for all research involving production is Elliott's *The Making of a Television Series*. Although the author deals with the production process of a specific form of documentary (a series of programmes designed for an adult education project), many of the features encountered are directly related to the set of decisions that are necessary in any production process. Indeed, in the conclusions the author generalises on the basis of personal observations and specifically evaluates the usefulness of his work for an examination of the TV drama production process.

One feature of Elliott's work is its meticulous detail. Probably, the fact that it was one of the pioneering research undertakings of its kind, seeking inspiration both in the analysis of other social phenomena and in the sociology of art as well as in media theory or film analysis, makes the book an overview of all the stages of the production process. By keeping to the gradual progression from original conception through a phase of research and development to production, post-production and broadcasting, the author is able to examine the features involved in the decision-making process, which permits identification of the critical co-ordination that informs the shaping of personal, conceptual, technical and aesthetic choice, the division and organisation of labour and the different levels of authority.

The Anglo-Saxon tradition, and the American school in particular, has always attached priority to the figure of the producer as the message generator and, thus, as the central axis for the content of televised fiction. In this respect, a study by Muriel Cantor, *The Hollywood Television Producer: his Work and his Audience*, which bases its discourse on a series of interviews with American TV producers, is worth mentioning. The value of the book, which follows methodologies proper to the social sciences, lies in the fact that it succeeds in painting a precise picture of TV work, through the perspectives of a significant group of professionals. At the end, one of the conclusions worth underlining is that creativity and autonomy are highly controlled in all the ambits of TV production and that, although fiction maintains a certain independence, it is subject to market forces and is therefore equally controlled by management.

Gitlin's study, *Inside Prime Time*, which combines aspects of the two above-mentioned research works, as well as adding significant elements of its own, takes note of these weaknesses in the TV fiction industry. Gitlin reaches his conclusions after interviewing a large number of professionals and also after a period spent observing the development of different televised productions. The most descriptive section leads us

through apparent chaos to an awareness of the inside story of production processes and offers a more complete perspective of the creation of televised fiction.

So far we have mentioned three research works whose purpose is to study TV production *per se* and which attempt to approach the problems involved in the decision-making process that lead up to the final shooting. These are pioneering studies and in this respect they rather betray their age but, unfortunately, they are anything but obsolete despite their years. The researcher interested in questions involving production will need to consult them and although he or she will encounter later studies, these all take the same approach: they are either descriptive of the production-specific tasks for a programme in question or else they generalise, going so far as to conceptualise the different stages as if they were conventions. The other predominant approach is the series of interviews with professionals in the sector such as directors, producers, scriptwriters and actors, among others, who express their particular views on their own involvement. In this way the range of features that have to be kept in mind in undertaking a TV fiction production is amplified, like a catalogue, yet no approaches are proposed for questioning the logic behind the organisation of the production process.

For his part, J.G. Butler (2) proposes different formulations of what he terms "critical analysis" for narrative and non-narrative programmes. In both cases he approaches it from three different standpoints: firstly, he proposes polysemic analysis as much as research into the content, significance and codification of texts and, in this sense, attempts to encourage the textual analysis of TV programmes as the first stage for the research and objectifying of production contents. Secondly, he indicates the different stages and questions to be resolved for an analysis of the structure of the programmes, depending on their flow, segmentation and interruption. It is at this point, according to Butler, that the researcher can explain how the programmes represent a concrete perspective with regard to certain contents. Lastly, he sets out the bases for an analysis of the sound and visual style of televised production fragments. This type of analysis focuses, above all, on the staging in relation to the narrative structure and, in this sense, it approaches the parameters that we wish to use for the proposals presented in this article. The great difference, however, is that Butler speaks of productions broadcast by certain channels and less of creating situations that lead to direct experimentation.

Older, but more interesting, are the cinema lessons by Eisenstein, (3) where the director attempted to represent with his students different staging possibilities for a short sequence in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. The book's author, Vladimir Niznhy, was one of Eisenstein's pupils, and he put together his class notes for this volume, explaining how with no technical resources available and only a small space for a stage the director devoted whole classes to discussing the tiniest element of the staging process and the planning of the most basic movements made by each one of the characters. In no case did he attempt to come to general conclusions or create concepts but merely to experiment with different ways of

reaching complementary or opposing approaches, in other words, the simple fact of questioning what, according to the majority of text books, is a mechanised process.

Other books and research articles distance themselves from these bases, but merely in order to lean towards major, already-established research approaches such as those mentioned at the beginning of this article. They can briefly be put under the heading of semiotic, sociological or even historical arguments. In order to broaden their awareness of these referents, those interested in the inside story of fictional productions can consult the large number of non-scientific publications; the latter are of great assistance, however, for they often incorporate rigorous data and highly varied information that can be useful for different applications. Lastly, cinematic research presents texts with practical exercises that can be easily extrapolated to the language of television, but they do not ultimately prove representative of the particular features proper to the medium.

A proposal for experimental methodologies

For these reasons, we believe that research approaches should be opened up whose purpose is to experiment with the TV fiction production process starting from the *praxis* itself. To this end, it should be mentioned that there is a series of videos edited by the Australian Film, Television and Radio School that attempt to illustrate the different stages of the production process with practical illustrations. In fact, these are recordings that exemplify the contents of many theoretical handbooks and, in this sense, they constitute interesting teaching material. Among the published titles are: *Shooting for drama* (1994), *Video Toolbox* (1994), *Editing techniques reducing time* (1991), *Multicam Direction Planning* (1990), *An Introduction to Floor managing* (1984).

In order to go beyond the models of practical cases that may liven up classes, exercises must be set up that provoke theoretical reflection and enable us to follow the research approach in an inverse direction, from practice to theory. In other words, instead of analysing in depth sequences or whole programmes from all those that are broadcast on any of the many existing television channels, scripts of short sequences can be composed which can then be recorded and the essentially polysemic nature of each scene can then be tested.

Audio-visual narration, like any other form of writing, has its own norms, syntax, grammar, morphology and rhetoric. Audio-visual language is a way of constructing "writing in images", but it also proves to be a means of analysis of the movement and recording of time, and its possibilities must be experimented with via empirical research.

The first proposal would be to attempt to set up different sequence-planning strategies aimed at showing that the different use of the conventions of language involves many interpretations of one and the same text, both from the formal and the structural standpoint. This first exercise might be called "Polysemic analysis of a fiction sequence" and would consist of questioning each step in those that are typified before reaching final production.

This is achieved on the basis of two main approaches:

- Recording the same script with two planning proposals, both with multiple-camera and with a single camera, in sets and on location, aimed at showing that audio-visual narrations with different meanings can emerge from one and the same text:

How are certain features emphasised over others?

How can we present situations in the positive or the negative?

In other words, what attitude or perspective predominates in accordance with the technique employed to record it?

How does motivation or the super-problem act to move the action?

How is the recording of time manipulated and what consequences does this involve?

How do the staging elements communicate features of the story to the viewer?

What possibilities does the organisation of space offer for solving the planning process?

How does any variation in the size of the shot act for the final meaning?

How does the rhythm influence the interpretation of the discourse?

How is distance or proximity with the characters created?

How do elements like music, sound or dialogues help to construct the story?

- The recording of what could be called type-situations as regards the staging but different planning, in other words, for instance a group of people seated around a table:

How are relationships set up and positions established within the space?

How far does respect for the thrust of the action permit a sequence to be explained?

How are the thrusts of the action multiplied the more new characters appear?

How are the characters' movements and entrances and exits from the set resolved?

Does the manipulation of the technical conditions have an effect on the final meaning of the sequence?

Based on an initial experience and the results to be obtained, a line of productions can be set up that provides a space for awareness and reflection on the different techniques that can be employed to construct audio-visual narratives.

Conclusions

- The decision-making process involved in any televised fiction production process is not a mechanical one. In fact, it is an essential part of creation and, as such, each of the considerations that are taken into account goes into shaping the final scenario in which the action takes place. Scenario is understood, in this instance, as everything that appears in the shot, from the most basic elements of *atrezzo* to the positioning of the elements in the shot.

- Existing research into the production of televised fiction offers very diverse guidelines for approaching the questions and problems to be resolved, as well as the elaboration of formal and structural analyses. Yet they are always *a posteriori* suggestions, in other words, based on programmes that have already been broadcast or on those undertaken by others.

- The experience acquired through exercises analysing different forms of fiction should enable us to create situations following a previously established set of criteria that give rise to practical experimentation. On the basis of these approaches, a series of conclusions should be formulated depending on the different applications of the conventions and techniques proper to television production.

- The possibilities opened up by digital technology, which is fast and agile, should enable us to create situations depending on pre-established criteria. Bringing about representations that can be the object of study can lead to new interpretations of the conventions of language and, particularly, to the publishing of materials that may be highly useful for critical approaches of a teaching and research nature.

NOTES

(1) In NEWCOMB, H.M. "La Creación del drama televisivo". In: JENSEN, L.B.; JANKOWSKI, N.W., eds. *Metodologías cualitativas de investigación en comuninación de masas.* Barcelona: Bosch Casa Editorial, 1993. p. 119.

(2) At the end of his book *Television: critical methods and applications*. London: Lawrence Elrbaum Associates Publishers, 2002. pp. 357-360.

(3) In NIZNHY, V. *Lecciones de cine de Einsenstein*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1964.

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