Looking at TV critically

Television, a wonderful and polemic communication medium, is nearing its 50th anniversary in Brazil. It is a long when TV sets represented status and were the reason for people to come to your house and watch it, and have time-taking discussions. In a very short time TV sets have become popular and reached even the poorest. Needless to say that television has affected family and social relationships.

The magic screen is capable of reaching millions instantaneously from north to south, without any distinction of age, sex or social condition. It broadcasts images and ideologies as if they were true and unquestionable, inducing all, especially the youngest, to an exaggerated consumerism, distorting values and behaviors and directly hypnotizing our children. Identical to other media, TV is used as an opinion manipulator and covertly explores the affective and emotional deficiencies of the poor classes. The latter spend their time switching from one channel to another in search of cheap satisfaction as a form of fulfilling their weaknesses.

The seducing and dominant TV discourse has been forming a generation of acritical young people. They have become passive and submissive to its domain since their have been losing their power of influence. With its highly sophisticated technology TV does not hesitate to show a fragmented and superficial world, and exhibit stereotyped models to a clientele incapable of discriminating between the real and the fantastic. Young people are growing up involved constantly by audio and visual appeals.

The most desolating factor is that interpersonal relationships and family life have greatly decreased. Whole families have an acritical attitude and become dumb in front of the screen. Such perplexity is evidenced in the news and soap-opera programs. It is extremely difficult to imagine someone who substitutes reading for a TV program. Undoubtedly TV is the constant and inseparable companion of the last decade of the century for many people and the “electronic babysitter” of many children. On the other hand, it is a democratic window opened to the world, as its defenders claim.

Taking these factors into consideration, the aim of this research is to analyze the verbal enunciations of showwomen of TV programs for children, namely Xuxa Park (October 1997) and Angel Mix (July 1997). The type of discursive stimuli children are submitted to and the reasons for such enchantment between the showwomen and their public are analyzed.

Children program models have their own
directions and bases. Children should learn how to discuss, overcome and adore the showwomen above all things. Sponsors must also sell their products. What is the gist of these programs? What does the hypnotizer do?

The answer to this question and its analysis have suggested this investigation not only in literature on children's programs but also by critical readings of TV communication according to Gutierrez (1978), Teixeira (1985), Moran (1989-1991), Rezende and Rezende (1993), and others. The program was analyzed, its recording was based on NUCR/SP norms (Oral Standard Portuguese from five Capital Cities) and its corpus was investigated from linguistic, affective-interactive, informative, entertaining and ideological points of view.

Defenders and contestants

Gutierrez (1978) found that as from 1895 modern man, constantly driven by the immediateness of images and sounds, was converted into a satisfied consumer of this mobile language which dominates time and space. Man crossed the threshold from a verbal civilization to an audiovisual one.

On the other hand, Gutierrez observes that the school, discarding in practice the existence of communication media and TV language, refuses to cope with social reality. The media as used by the consumer society form a much more vertical, alienating and massification school than the traditional one.

In Gutierrez's point of view the child's first "reading book" is the iconographic language. He insists on the fact that modern young people are liable to assimilate images without the process of analysis and synthesis.

In the initial chapter of his book Devoame otra vez, Oscar Landi (1993:15) says that TV images link and overlay themselves during the whole day in an unending manner.

So that an education act may be accompanied by participation and creativity, education must give a learning strategy to the learner so that she/he may reflect on the information vehicle and, as a future adult, to act on, modify and transform reality. If he dominates the audiovisual communication, the young learner will have greater possibilities to be a critical and selective consumer and not merely a passive receiver.

Bruno Souza Leal (1996:21) has the same opinion. In this author's opinion audiovisual resources would be a complement to the activity of the professional in the classroom and may be the door for written culture.

Moran (1989) sees the critical analysis of communication as social exchange or as relationship between persons. The analysis of communication is perceiving, interpreting and judging the reality of the word uttered by the hegemonic class besides observing its unnaturalness and its opaqueness. Furthermore, the media simplify reality through stereotypes. Such simplification is seen as if it were the real thing. It is so manipulated that people would believe in its interpretation without any questionings and difficulties: "The playful character of television is its alluring factor. It exercises a terrible power because of its constant presence and because it is a point of reference in a country with many illiterate or functionally illiterate people" (Moran, 1991:38).

According to Moran, the level of personal knowledge, the interference of other sources, besides TV, in the representation of one's reality give him/her greater possibilities to doubt, criticize, reject what she/he sees on television. That is the reason why the school system, as a privileged space for the understanding of reality, should wake up towards a policy of effective interaction with the community and its media and should exercise the new language registers that sensitize and motivate the pupils.

In the chapter called “Mass Communication Media”, McLuhan states that 20th century communications have changed substantially in the wake of the cultural revolution. Media have deeply affected contemporary man, voided distances, made present those absent and transformed the Earth into a “global village”. Information, economy, commerce, art and other items have been globalized.

In “Television: The Scapegoat”, José Marques de Melo (1979) focuses on some relevant topics in his reflections on television. He states that parents-educators delegate the responsibility for their children's bad schooling to the quality of TV programs. Intellectuals accuse television of alienation since its contents are different from the people’s real concern. They agree that TV is solely interested in selling its own products.

Marques de Melo, however, says that all these accusations could not be dumped at TV's door since television is being used to cover up the country's social and cultural backwardness. Television is just an instrument which is manipulated according to the wishes and intentions of power holders.

Teixeira (1985) says that television commercial channels aim principally at selling products and
impacting the mores and ways of life proper to the capitalist system predominant in the West.  

Mallow Labrador (apud Teixeira, 1985:16-17) argues that besides the emission of radioactive rays, the insistence with which scenes are shown provides an asphyxia in the child’s creative imagination and gives her/him a passive attitude. Lack of creativity may be demonstrated in children’s play and in their homework.

Muniz Sodré (apud Teixeira) argues that the relationship instituted by television is extremely awful because of its lack of dialogue. Sodré says that the system sees the child as a virtual consumer. The child insists on the mother to buy what she/he sees in TV advertisements.

In the First National Symposium on Television and Cinema Tatiana Belinsk states: “Television, the cinema, the theatre are, willy-nilly, educational means. They educate to the right, to the left, forward, backward - they educate, resign, inform, misinform people; sometimes they form something”. (apud Teixeira, 1985:31).

According to professors Ana Lúcia M. de Rezende and Nauro Borges de Rezende (1993), the child addicted to TV and sitting before it during many hours per day is deprived of two fundamental opportunities in her/his full development: to speak and act. She/he neither asents nor dissent; hears and sees; neither listens nor observes, much less, contests. Television is thus a dogmatic factor and as such facilitates the television viewer’s complete evasion.

Fuenzálida (1985, apud Landi, op. cit.) observes that the first contacts of the child or the adult with television are characterized by curiosity. Sound, lights and images are elements that interact as attention polarities. The environment in which television is placed in the home and by adults lead the child, from a very early age, to accept it as an important object. Even before the child knows how to speak she/he already in front of the television.

Paulo Maia (1979:69-77) writes that culture arises from social practice and represents the interests and the aspirations of a predominant technical-bureaucratic and authoritarian class. All communication media are mechanisms that state machinery uses on society. Acquiring a culture is not only to accumulate learning prepared by dominant technical-bureaucratic class. The best solution is criticism at the level of television contents; one should not limit oneself only to an impressionistic and insufficient vision linked to the spectator.

Joan Ferrés (1998: 12) observes that the school’s trend is to adopt unilateral attitudes in front of the television phenomenon. A school which does not teach its pupils how to watch television is a school which does not educate. Television must be considered as an opportunity for the democratization of knowledge and culture, for the widening of one’s feelings, for the potentialization of learning.

From the above opinions one may surmise that many authors are in favor of the communication media but would like to include a more efficient educational pedagogy. Other disagree and see television as the terrible cause of the bad bio-psycho-social formation of children, teenagers and young people. Together with economical, environmental and sociocultural factors they condition stereotype values by television’s direct or indirect influence.

Xuxa Park program: an analysis

Welcoming gestures and words towards the public at the shows and at the television viewers are important characteristics of the showwoman Xuxa. They transmit affection and interaction already evident at the start of the show (see lines 7 - 16). One may note that in some lines the showwoman uses an elaborate, concise and spontaneous language. In others there are traits of slang language, colloquial expressions with some hesitations and repetitions (see lines 8, 13-14, 16, 75-76, 134, 222,370 - 372).

007. X: good MORN::ing:: FOLKS:: good MORN::ing:: a FINE day for you all, my small ones ..a FINE day for all CHILDren ... uhu ... uhu fine news ... today is our day ...

008. I mean we are already preparing ourselves for tomorrow ... tomorrow is our day ...

010. the official children’s day... but Saturday is children’s day ...

011. at least in our program ... I would like to show you ... that today that our program will be SOMETHAT different more special than that on other Saturdays because ...

013. the environment is so sweet ... you are here with me ... you enjoy yourselves so much

014. so much is that so CHILDren here ... here children ...

015. Doc: Xuxa strolls on the stage and shakes hands with some children.

016. X: hi, children ... good morning ... thanks ... be happy ...enjoy yourselves today ... thanks:

075. X: what will happen I don’t know ... do I? every time that this smile appears on Junior’s face

076. I choose one of the questions one of the people here and I do I choose... well... what comes
134. young folk ... every one of you will ... will win a souvenir of our program.
222. You ... even you ... must go to extremes and enjoy yourselves I already know that you
370. and let's sing ... let's enjoy ourselves ... we'll have many games: in our program
372. tomorrow ... will be children's day ... paint the town red ... free everything ... raise
373. hob ... be happy: scream scream

By means of body language, music and mimicry, the showwoman transmits happiness and makes herself at home with the children on the stage (lines 95-98).

X: little chief ordered you to lie down: little chief told you to roll on the floor: little ordered you to open your legs: little chief told you to do the buttock race: backward...
forward little chief ordered you to jump:...:...:...:...:...: little chief told you to shut your mouth:..hush..sh..sh who speaks would have eaten trash... little chief told you to speak

The connotive function which incites people to consume products and attitudes/actions is evident (lines 158-161, 214-217). The means used is the association of words.

X: I would like to show you ... that Bical is MAGnificent it's EXTreme ... it's for you who love it ... dote on it ... only see it pounding down ... you who like skating ... Bical's skating fashion ... well, all colors ... all sizes
for you to enjoy ... look it pounds down for you who like playin' tennis

X: CHILDren:::FLAsh FLash FLash FLAsh FLAsH UAU is FLash:: well well... look it's Flash BEARS your walking rhythm it's super SU::PER TOUGH for you who like to jump ... to skip ... GO TO EXTREMES ... it's ::s ::s tough
against falls shocks so just remember the name: it's FLash FLash the watch of extremes.

Xuxa explores the child's and young people's vanity and thus fashion parades are promoted. She encourages them to buy and use the models suggested (lines 728-738).

X: I'll say hello to you all since summer is coming ... it's JUST to remind you
that you'll be like mermaids ... true MERMAIDS ... PRETTY... incredible thing,
right... you may... well ... arrive on the beach... and everybody will hold their breath
all will notice and when they see you ... they gasp OH: OH: pretty mermaid
juicy marvelous ... if you're using beach fashion
by Xuxa of COURSE you'll hear comments along the whole beach ... the cloth
design, the manikin everything was chosen while thinking about you I MYSELF
at home it's tremendous ... pretty yah! yah ! look how pretty you will be like this here::
MAGNIFICENT result isn't? I will show you some manikins with the girls
on the fashion parade. you ... will strut in front of the boys and you'll make their mouth
water, you strut about once more ... you understand the plot? ... now the fashion parade

The showwoman even advertises the products of the sponsors and gives to the participating young people all kinds of toys, balls, sweetmeats and even TV sets (lines 410-411, 672-674).

X: the winner will get the products by Visconti toys ... ball and a walkman second
place will have Visconti toys and ball but no walkman this time ... understood ? let's go

X: seventy grams each ok ? to be taken from the can it's Mini Gloria it's Mini Gloria::
the winner will get ... see ... this satchel FULL of things
of Gloria Mini ALSO a small TV set:: the TV set is here for you to take home

The showwoman also offers bikini swimming suits to the tug-of-war winners (lines 749 - 752). The same comments may be made with regard to the commercialization of her records. Subtly she induces the children and young people to buy them (lines 796-799).

X: Yago and Tiago you will stand here at this extreme in the tug-of-war ... look ... when
they pull hard on the rope and the fish here ... look here ... shows on this side
the boys win ... if it appears on the side of the girls ...
the girls win ... ok. So, please please the beach show Xuxa by Marcy

X: have a look at my record I'll show you something stop shouting... it's this ok this one?
CHILDren ... tomorrow ... children's day ... how about playing at home a SUPER music for all children to dance ... agree ? I would insist on
you understand? your day would be tremendously NICE wouldn't it... imagine... on this
The showwoman uses some games to teach, albeit in a very superficial way, some general knowledge (lines 259-263).

259. X: region of Brazil ... which is the region in Brazil in which snow falls?
260. T: Hmm?
261. X: where is the only region in Brazil in which snow falls? oh oh oh oh
262. in the south.


116. X: That’s right ... fruit ... Mr Lucas, fruit? Some young people don't like fruits...
117. make faces when mum says ... take a fruit ... no...I won’t ... you have to eat fruits ...
118. you have to drink milk ... juice ... to grow up and be STRONG and healthy ok?
119. ... vegetables ... you can’t imagine what you’re losing ... so many vitamins

295. X: If you want to be a deFENder of nature ... pay attention:::: go to the post office
296. and ask for the green card ... well ... the green card must be filled
297. yes ... filled in ... you’re asked to do so ... your name ... address ... everything
298. alright ... then you must ask for the stamp of a defender:: of nature

303. as a defender of nature you can ... you can ... so you can scream and shout if you see
304. anything wrong...if you see the woods burning... somebody selling an animal in the market
305. have you seen somebody doing this? have you seen people selling wild animals?

315. the Peixe-Boi Centre of Itamaracá Island in Pernambuco is celebrating the birth of two baby::
316. manatee::: TWINS...see... interesting, isn’t it the first to be born in a zoo in South America.

Results

Results show that the showwoman uses complex phrase constructions, although concise ones, mixed with frequent slang language and colloquial expressions. More infrequent are truncated expressions or deviant expressions. Cognate function is in use too. With regard to attitudes, discourse slightly touches the ecological problem and the conservation of the environment.

All games have a commercial aim and frames transmit a distorted image of reality and thus globalizing information of capitalism which goes unperceived by children. Children are the preferential goals of the advertisements and of all manipulation. They keep the audience in a spell and influence shopping. The children will be undoubtedly consumers of food products and all superfluous things advertised during the program.

No situation of cooperative action is given in which children help one another and together reach a certain goal. Everything is done individually and competitively, to win a gift. Technically the program is very well built since it has benumbing visual resources.

With her pleasing manner, charismatic bearing and a Europeanized prettiness the showwoman certainly neutralizes the above image. Sounds, colored scenes, enhanced clothes, music and even the media have contributed to make the program a success and the showwoman an idol while putting the infant-juvenile spectators in a state of ecstasy. These are hypnotized and emotionally and affectively exploited. During the program the speaker is the showwoman in an exclusive manner and the participating children and young people may only verbalize what she allows, namely, some phrases and linguistic segments.

Another aspect that should be taken into account is that Xuxa deals with children as equals: she plays games with them, jumps and imitates them, without being too much of a bore.

In spite of all this, Xuxa is a prototype that became a success. Her type of communication is being reproduced during the years and new disciples are being formed. It is rather painful to see such a person with so much seduction power missing so many opportunities since she does not deal with educational contents, with more elaborate playful and pleasing situations from the cultural and educational point of view.

Watching TV critically may be a way to get young people to reflect on contents useful for life.

Angel Mix program

Showwoman Angelica uses non-standard and fast language, full of slang throughout the program (lines 7,8,12, 21-26, 63-65). Some verbs and words are pronounced by halves. With regard to affectivity one may see that the showwoman enters the stage without a single word denoting affectivity or
endearing with the public or with the television viewers.

007. A: good:: morning Angel Mix ... good morning foomoolks Hi good morning
008. to you all ... I feel it ... I see ... you're all exited .... isn't it so ? open the

012. rowdy rowdy crowdy yah yah :/ very well ... you'll begin the day with all of us:

021. A: games? ... are you eager to play games? yes? games there are
022. look at the posters there to of Taís and Marlene who came to
023. enjoy themselves with all of us ... kisses to Salvador here represented too ... ok turn up
024. the television volume… oh no… not too much ... you'll wake the neighbors your
025. neighbors... tell everybody not to keep their feet on the group.. come on... let's jump all
026. with us here ... we have already begun the day stepping with the right foot ... I will ...

063. A: the girls will control themselves... won't they ... sorry for them ... they would like to
064. control ... it's something that seems to snap ... it will return ... this one
065. oh this one is soft ... only you hold it a little bit and you'll see ...

A trait of information, totally unlinked to the program sequence, may be seen in lines 186 - 198. Information flow develops in a paraphrased and truncated way on the word kangaroo.

186. A: you're thinking... you're thinking.... and today everybody is thinking on the same...
187. on the word kangaroo ... in the aborigines' language in Australia
188. it means ... I'm not hearing what you're saying ... it's the answer that
189. they gave to the English colonizers when they asked them
190. the name of that strange animal ... aborigines don't know English ... so ... so ... so
191. they said::: “kan::garoo”, that is ... I not understand what you say...
192. see now? ... do not start saying things you not
193. understand right ... otherwise the dunce will be greater... so ...
194. you don't know any English and you may say the greatest blunder ...
195. you'll have to pay for the greatest blunder ... ask ... do not be ashamed no ...
196. you won't... I don’t understand... what is this ... do not do this::: thin oh ... oh ...
197. kang::aroo ... oh ... oh ... I don’t know the meaning of kangaroo don’t know kangaroo

198. otherwise you’ll commit the greatest blunder .. is that right? ... think about it ... OK

The program section called Crooked Questions was neither instructive nor interesting since the question level was extremely low. No reflection was necessary and subestimated the intellectual capacity of the young people present. Only quick replies to push the right button were necessary.

A: the cricket sings ... it's a character in the story of Pinocchio ... say
383. say ... which is the only animal in the whole world that speaks? ... five ...
384. Doc: Angelica has the five fingers of her hand wide open.
385. A: Yes Isaura answer ... the parrot.
386. ... you lost ... par...rot ... par... rot ... the parrot only repeats re:peats it
387. doesn't speak. who speaks is the human being, the human being is an animal
388. Doc: one of the girls smears a cake on the face of the loser.
393. A: it:: broke... it:: broke... now... attention please attention please Michele and Karol ...
394. put your hands behind your back.question... King Pedro the first was the father of King Pedro
395. the Second son of King John the Sixth...who signed the decree on the abolition of slavery.

Games are used as a pretext to advertise “objects” sold by the sponsors of the program. They sharpen the children’s desires on non-healthy food and sometimes inaccessible from the point of view of the parents’ low salary. There is a general illusion in the child that if she/he consumes such and such a product a very healthy and happy life will ensue (line 39-45). Commercial aim is at the back of the mind when the same products are given to the children as gift (lines 64-65).

039. A: and who is going to participate? hi ... hi ... hi ...
040. Ninho Soleil ... cold products by
041. Nes::tlé for children of all ages ... it the yogurt with the little sun ... look ... see ...
042. the little sun smiling wonderfully... here it is... crowds are after it... everybody is after it. 042. it has pieces of fruit in it ... the little cheese the milky drink in its small bottle and
043. the big one... liter ... for the whole family ... the little cheese of the little sun Ninho Soleil
044. is really delici:ous ... it helps you to grow up STRONG and HAPPY.
045. you have to have it in your fridge ... right ... Ninho Soleil
046. is the strength SWEET little SUN with ALL top quality of Nes::tlé:: look.
Language in TV child programs

064. hear ... hear ... who’s going to win ... who’s going to win ... the thermos
065. bag with the products Ninho Soleil ... will win a tracking suit ... pretty tracking suit

The program and the showwoman foment expectations in the young public by offering them products and making them sure that they will be the winners (lines 283 - 288)

283. A: see... the modern world experiments the age of the computer... one day everybody will
284. have one a computer ... you needn’t have to wait this day to get one
285. see whom I have at my side ... here
286. Doc: Angelica shows the computer
287. A: you have only to participate in the Itau-tec competition Angel Mix... exactly... you
288. to put it outside the envelope. AnGELica ... I want my computer ... yes insist on it

Results

Besides using informal language, overcharged with slang and deviations from standard language considered a rule by the school system, our analysis shows that the showwoman Angelica expresses herself with no real contents, intermittently, mechanized form, in a very fast way and totally lacks enriching messages which might sensitize and teach the public and other television viewers. Her notion of language makes one surmise that she considers all her listeners children, who are inserted in a lower class cultural and sociocultural context, who do not understand the standard language and who lack access to other sources for information and leisure time.

The program is filled with cartoon films, games and many advertisements of sponsors. Program sections do not develop and the dialogues do not give any special information to the television viewer. Less still, do they educate him or her.

The program is not pleasing to see because of its poor cultural quality. It isn’t worse because the showwoman neutralizes it somewhat with colored scenes, music, competitions, “games” and high tech images.

On the other hand, one may say that owing to the showwoman’s visual aspect, cartoons and advertisements, she manages to hold the attention of the young public. Hypnotized with all these images, the verbal enunciation and the variability of language usage are transmitted unawares to the young public.

The aim of this research work is the analysis of verbal enunciation of showwomen in young people’s programs to investigate the type of discourse stimulus undergone by our children and discover the answer for so much enchantment.

The adoration the young public has for the showwoman and the highly colored and inviting stage contribute towards the robotization of the public and hold the attention of children for many hours at a stretch. The program is built around an adult-centered vision and around a psychology of adolescents dealt with as if were child it value. Programs are undertaken by showwomen who pretend to like children but who actually are merely pseudo-artists fabricated by the media.

Much more important than controlling what TV presents daily is to prepare the public, especially the younger public, to see and use it for the building of their life, without being a slave to it and without being used by it. The family, as first institution of education, and the school, as an institution for formal education, must know not merely the type of action and language inserted in the program, but should also discuss, compare, criticize, analyze and make sure that everyone is capable of discerning the negative and positive aspects of all communication media.

The incorporation of communication media as learning practice may be a democratic window to the world, as its defenders insist upon, when it favors educational development, promotes the learning ability of children and young people without losing the reality-imaginary relationship, links the school with television and admits that it is a total success with young people.

“Communication media seem to be non-problematic transparent things”, says Moran. If one cannot stop the television “speaking monopoly”, then it is possible to re-formulate its messages, hindering their linear adherence and their unquestioned absorption. Thus, one watches programs and not television.

The school needs to widen the information world of young people. Otherwise, this same world will continue to have a summarized, fast, superficial and fragmented vision of reality. Mediation may be obtained by debates and reflections on the programs’ quality whose themes are interesting to the students, through analyses of the audiovisual language, color, action, lights etc. and comparing them with other language usage.

The efficacious practice of suggesting creative and variegated activities such as videos, computers, meaningful readings and television are means the school cannot dispense with.

The formation of television viewers who are less vulnerable to the manipulation of information, who
are conscious and capable of “reading” television from the point of view of ethics and citizenship is an essential priority for all institutions in the 20th and 21st centuries. The challenge to teach pupils to watch television with a critical mind will give a less naive and a more committed perception from those who participate in it. It requires, above all, a deeper knowledge of this highly important means of communication.

Educating systematized knowledge, educating for information, for culture necessarily includes educating for the television communication.

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Notes

X: Xuxa, the name of TV showwoman
A: Angelica, the name of TV showwoman
Doc: Document that describes scenes, gestures and actions of the showwomen. Other abbreviations are the names of children participating in the program.

References


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