Chapter 11

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LIVE TELEVISION IS STILL ALIVE

On television as an unfulfilled promise

To begin with, let us pose the thesis that this article will uphold throughout: television remains deeply influenced by the possibility of live broadcasting, despite the fact that, from a historical point of view, the golden age of live broadcasting (the 1950s in the USA and Western Europe) has long been over. If we can talk of a 'language' of television, or, more modestly, of a semantic specificity of the medium, it lies in this possibility, not always accomplished, but at least virtually present in many programmes or sequences of television. This claim is both semiotic and sociological: we will try to understand why a technical possibility, translated into specific codes, remains a fundamental part of viewers' expectations.

In television theories, the current academic trend is to reduce the importance of live broadcasting (Corner, 1997), arguing that the evolution towards 'narrowcasting' and 'fragmented broadcasting' calls for the end of global analyses of television. I propose, however, that it is still relevant to talk about 'television' as a unified medium. Granted, most of the examples of programmes in the following article are taken from general audience and national channels in various national contexts, be they public or private. However, despite the already dated prophecies on the advent of 'narrowcasting' or 'fragmented television', let us note that general audience channels still draw most of the audiences worldwide. I will, in addition, make the claim that much of what happens on cable and satellite channels is still related to 'liveness', as many themed channels emphasize their ability to broadcast live alongside general audience channels which continue doing so.

Let us remind the reader of how the word 'live' (or its translation in French 'direct', Italian 'diretta', German 'direkt') has been used, and is still being used (or alluded to) in programme titles. This is a very widespread feature of television, both old and modern, which can be confirmed by different national histories (e.g. Baget Hernas, 1993; Bourdon, 1990; Briggs, 1979; Grasso, 1992). In the USA, from Saturday Night Live and Primetime Live, the word 'live' has never disappeared from the names of talk or variety shows. In France, En direct de (live from) was the name for a series of programmes in the 1950s - 'from' actually referred to a variety of hard-to-reach or strange locations (from an aircraft carrier, from a sink hole, etc.). Here, television wanted to exhibit its technical capacities. In the 1980s, on the second French channel, star-host and anchorwoman Christine Ockrent fronted a show simply called Direct. In Israel, where the talk show is a major primetime genre, the word 'live' proliferates. For three years, the second (and leading) channel has been broadcasting, three times a week a programme called Live with Dan Shilon Interviewing. Finally, much of what has been called in the 1980s 'reality programming' in the United States, 'television verità' in Italy, and 'reality-shows' in France actually consists of live
programming; most shows conforming to this so-called ‘new’ genre use the live spectacle of ordinary viewers telling us about their pains and problems, with the help of the ever-present host (Eurodience 1990).

Beyond the historical fact that live broadcasting has declined between the 1950s and the 1960s (simply because game-shows, not to mention drama, moved from live broadcasting to film or tape), the use of live broadcasting as an explicit and important resource has not disappeared from television. Televising reminds us that it links us live to something to a specific place (‘live from’), to a specific person (‘live with’). A fully fledged history of live broadcasting would probably discover other interesting examples of the use of live broadcasting, beyond the permanence of the rhetoric of live broadcasting. A good example is Vianello’s (1986) analysis of live television in the context of the ‘power politics’ of the networks in the American television system. However, my point here is that this history presents a fundamental, socio-semiotic unity.

‘Liveness’ in television theories

Many theories of television have – and continue to be – centred on ‘liveness’, first, as part of a professional ideology. In its early days, when professionals started debating the specificity of television (notably in comparison with the cinema), they related it to three characteristics, namely screen size, domestic reception and, finally and most notably, ‘liveness’. This last characterization of television has evoked lyrical texts. Live broadcasting has been exalted as a way to conquer time and distance, to have vast groups of people commune in a new experience. Historical research (see, for the United States, Vianello, 1986) reminds us of the place of liveness in professional ideologies, most clearly among television engineers and technicians but also among critics. At a talk presented by the French director of programmes in 1955, television was presented, as was typical of the time, as ‘the possibility at last given to mankind to defeat, through the image, the limitations of time and space’ (Bourdon, 1986: 49).

Even though ‘liveness’ was a professional theory, with a strong emphasis on ideological notions such as ‘authenticity’ and ‘truth’, it was adapted by academic theory in various countries. Books and treatises about the aesthetics of live television were written during the 1950s and the 1960s. However, these theories seem to have become unfashionable. Most recently, a vigorous attack against theories of live broadcasting as central to television has been launched by J.T. Caldwell (1995). Studying American television, he diagnoses a mutation which he calls ‘televisuality’: under the effects of competition, of the economic crisis which it has caused, mass television (the major networks) has started stressing its stylistic performances, the quality of its authors and ‘signatures’ and its ability to process pictures through digital packaging. This televisual regime, which he terms ‘exhibitionist’, also corresponds to a technical and industrial mutation. In this context, live television is seen as quite secondary, and the ideology is rather one of television as an opaque medium.

Despite the quality of his argument, Caldwell omits two major points. First, stylistic exhibitionism has not erased genres which systematically use live broadcasting as a resource. These genres stress ‘liveness’ through a quite traditional series of indices, such as the direct address to the viewer, and editing as a sign of continuity of the action. These indices will be reviewed in detail later in this article. Second, refined stylistic treatment is more a major mutation of television than a strategy of American networks at a given point of their history and in given genres. World television, both national and local stations, still resorts massively to live broadcasting in traditional genres.

Furthermore, emphasizing the capacity to broadcast live can operate together with stylistic refinement, as we have seen during the Barcelona Olympics: the most refined digital effects are
not incompatible with the fact that this image, however reprocessed and manipulated, is a 'live' image. And this is reinforced by the capacity of the image, at any time, to stop being processed (slow motion, divided screen) and to fill the whole screen. I suggest that these manipulations show the intervention of the televisual enunciator (that is, the channel and its various delegates, hosts and commentators) in the live event, rather than the disappearance of the live event itself into the televisual representation. Furthermore, all this processing does not affect (or very rarely does so), the acoustic data so fundamental in television yet perennially forgotten by theorists and professionals alike: the voice. Television is always an audiovision (Chion, 1994).

Four types of television: fully live, continuity, edited, fiction

At this point, let us propose a division of television texts not so much into genres, in the traditional sense, as in terms of types, where live television is more or less achieved. Two qualifications: these types do not necessarily correspond to complete programmes; they might concern sequences within programmes. And again: live really is not only about the technical performance, but also about the spectatorial belief - these, as we have seen, do not completely overlap.

This distinction, incidentally, is present in the technical vocabulary of many television stations. French television once classified its programmes as 'vrai direct' (truly live), versus 'direct différé' (recorded-live television), or 'faux direct' (falsely live). At the level of spectatorial beliefs, we will oppose 'fully live', where the spectator has the full sense of experiencing a life event, and 'continuity television', where the spectator only partly has this feeling. Our third type is 'edited television'. All television is edited (directors of live programmes actually talk of 'live editing' - 'montage en direct'). However, in this article, I will use the expression only for programmes that are edited after shooting (in the editing room) and are not fictional, which have been shot 'in real life'. Our fourth type is fiction, played by actors, and edited - as far from live broadcasting as one can think, since it presupposes a high degree of previous elaboration. Some fictional genres actually retain proximity with liveness, but more on that later. Of course, live television is also elaborated, and we are aware of that. But that elaboration is supposed to serve an ongoing event, to give us a chance to see not so much the work of television as such but the workings of the world (albeit the television studio) in its most interesting aspects.

Fully live versus continuity

Fully live television is best exemplified by major media events when television cannot possibly not be live: these major media events have been theorized by Dayan and Katz (1992) who have described them as 'windows' or 'holes' in the usual routine programming. At these moments, television seems to be completely at the service of the event, even if it might have contributed to its organization. In such cases, the paratext (Genette, 1997) also works at full capacity. It is not only from the screen where the Pope is walking (Poland, 1979), where Sadat arrives in Jerusalem (Israel, 1977) that you can be sure the event is a live event. It is also because, weeks before, you have been told the event is about to occur. The world around you can be visibly affected by the passion surrounding the event. The city is deserted, everybody is watching, you have been told by the radio not to drive around the airport or the stadium where the event is taking place.

In our daily life as viewers, we experience less the regime of 'fully live' than that of 'continuity'. We are in a televised world where a lot looks (and sounds) live but is not necessarily so.
infer liveness from the text and also from assumptions about specific genres (news is more likely
to be live than variety shows, major weekly prime-time variety shows are more likely to be live
than daily daytime game shows). Of course, the word ‘live’ might be chromakeyed on the screen
(as during the news, in many cases, or in the titles of programmes). However, some programmes
are live without claiming their liveness in such a way. Moreover, if television claims to be live, it
never claims not to be live (or on very specific occasions, as will be analysed later). Thus, a rich,
ambiguous land is created for the viewers’ inferential work.

Suppose, however, the viewer has just subscribed to cable and turns on their set to discover a
new channel. Is it live? The answer might come from textual indices: a host looks at us straight in
the eyes, in the flat lighting of the video, and starts stammering, then apologizes. We tend to think
routinely, that we are seeing a live programme. Our knowledge of programming might also help.
If you turn on your television at 8 pm in France, at 9 pm in Spain, this is the hour of the newscast.
If you turn on your set at 10 pm in the same countries (too late for the main news, too early for
the late night news), you are left with two alternatives: a newsflash, which indicates a major event
has occurred, or a documentary or a report on the news, which uses live television as archive
footage. If this latter inference is the right one, then the familiar face of the host will soon be
replaced by another familiar face, or covered by a voice-over, which will tell you how to interpret
these images.

Sequence-guarantors of live continuity: the direct address (the look to
the camera)

Using the example of news, I have been driven to treat ‘live broadcasting’ and the ‘look to the
camera’ of the newscaster as nearly equivalent. Before referring to programmes as whole, we
should try to consider the basic segments, or sequences of television, inasmuch as they help us to
identify one of our four types: liveness, continuity, editing, fiction. Let us talk, following many
authors, of the ‘direct address’, to define the sequence where a person looks straight at the camera
(as if at the viewers) and addresses the viewers, using the appropriate deixis [proof of ‘liveness’].
The most evident part of this deixis is of course the personal pronouns ‘I’ (the host) and ‘you’ (the
viewers at home). One should add that the word ‘live’ might be used here (‘we are coming to you
live’), and interpreted as a specifically televisual deictic: it refers not only to the moment when the
speaker is talking (even if the sequence was recorded), but to that moment inasmuch as it is the
same moment for the speaker and for the addresses (the viewers at home). ‘I am talking to you
live’ is the televisual version of ‘I am talking to you now’.

Even though Umberto Eco has written that it is one of the characteistics of the ‘neo-
television’ of the 1980s, which he claims stresses contact with the viewers (Eco, 1990), the ‘direct
address’ has been important from the first days of television. We should carefully distinguish two
phenomena: the systematic exploitation of television stardom (which characterized competitive
commercial television systems), and the presence of a group of familiar mediators, of television
figures, which is a common feature of television. From the early experiences of live television,
programmers have ‘naturally’ resorted to television mediators, who looked and talked at the
camera.

Where do we find the ‘direct address’, the look to the camera of the ‘I and you together’? In a
very systematic manner, in the opening and closing sequences of continuity television pro-
grammes, when the host greets us, enumerates the list of his guests, and gives us an appointment
for next week (or for many weeks to come). There are variations according to genres, but the
basic pattern is present in newscasts (be it reduced to a simple ‘good day’ and ‘good bye’), in talk
shows, in game shows, in variety shows, or in political debates.
The look to the camera is present in another type of sequence, one which I call 'addressed actuality'. The mediator still addresses us, but tells a story in the third person, of what has happened. He uses deictics like 'yesterday' and 'today', but the viewers are no longer referred to in the discourse. There is still some sense of live television, but less than in the direct address. In another case, the mediator looks at us, but eliminates references to the deixis of the present. He tells us a story of the past. This sequence I call the 'addressed history'. The story might be told in the present tense, but the tense is used always with the value of a preterite: it describes the succession of events in the past, without any relation to the time when the story is told. Such was the regime of shows where a narrator (usually a famous mediator) would tell stories of the past (James Mason in English, Alain Découx in French). This type of show seems no longer to be popular on television. Was it a live programme? Again, at the textual level, there are some indications to the contrary. Verbally, we are detached from the time of the actual telling of the story. Visually, there might be some carefully edited sequences to illustrate the narrator's story. At the level of production, in the case of the French programme, we know that it was initially broadcast live, then later moved to tape.

**Continuity television: the part of the voice**

As we can see, our television types are not necessarily related to entire shows. In effect, the types of television are realized more or less in specific sequences of unequal duration. We want to try to break the flow of television into constitutive sequences (bearing in mind we cannot completely escape the notion of flow, to which we will return later). Of course, these sequences are related to one another by specific traits, which we might call 'suprasequential' (to paraphrase the 'suprasegmental' used in linguistics). As the reader might have noticed, we consider the voice and its relation to images as a key criterion for classifying basic sequences of television. The voice, and sound in general, are continuously neglected in many analyses of television and film, with notable exceptions (Scannell, 1991; Chion, 1994). Chion, one of the most interesting analysts of sound in film, goes as far as to claim that television is nothing but 'illustrated radio'. This is extreme. I will follow him when he affirms that television, although a visual medium, is a 'vococentric' medium, a medium where the voice orients the viewers decisively in certain directions of interpretation. The voice governs television. But then, there are different kinds of voice.

Again, we have to distinguish between technology and belief. We analyse television from an ideal viewer's point of view. Let us consider three situations. First, the viewer perceives the voice as 'voice-over'. It has been added to the film at the time of editing. The voice is slow, which often creates the effect of a text being read. In that case, I will speak, after Michel Chion (1994), of 'acousmatic voice'. The acousmatic voice, which has no physical identity, can be opposed to the voices which belong to the films, which are all visualized, or, at least, visualizable. They do not generate the effect of a text read, of a prepared story, but of more spontaneous (or less formal) interventions. As opposed to the acousmatic voice, visual and visualizable voices belong together. One can always switch from a visualizable voice to a visualized voice, and conversely (a journalist commenting on his film is now on camera and addresses us). But the acousmatic voice has to remain off screen, at least for the duration of the documentary concerned.

I have tried to avoid using technical terms (like voice-over, voice-off camera), because my point of view is not technical. Let us come back to the example of synchronized play-back. When the singer was singing his song 'live', for most viewers it was a visual voice. Some knew it was sound over simulated synchronization (we might call it 'pseudo-visualized voice'). Another case: in a documentary, relevant sounds are added to pictures of a crowd. Again, we can speak of 'pseudo-visualized sounds': in most cases, the viewers will actually perceive such sounds
as recorded at the time the film was shot, as belonging to the pro-filmic, to the ‘world-being-televised’. While, in the case of acousmatic sounds, the sound’s source belongs to the television institution, operating ‘from above’ on the world-being-televised.

Let us return to continuity television. As far as sound is concerned, continuity television precludes acousmatism: all sounds are either visualized or visualizable. In the studios of game shows, variety shows and talk shows, this is obviously the case of the voices of guests and mediators – journalists and hosts – belonging to the institution. However, some people might be very far from the set, while their voices will still be visualizable. In some shows, people are requested to phone from home. Their voices are visualizable (even though sometimes the screen, as a technological synecdoche for the individual speaking, presents a close-up of the phone), even though we might never see them. We know who they are, they have a social identity. They are people interacting in front of us, in the world-being-televised. A more subtle case is the one of sound-only news reports. The newscaster tells us we are about to hear a report by a certain correspondent; then we hear the correspondent’s voice, usually with a photograph of her/his face, over the background of a map of the country where the events reported are taking place, and from where the correspondent is calling (or has called?). Sometimes the voice is recorded, sometimes it is live (and the word ‘live’ might be chromakeyed). If it is recorded, the newscaster is actually listening ‘with us’ to a tape, not to a human being. My contention here is that, phenomenologically, the whole apparatus of television is working to create the illusion of a voice that is both visualized and live.

The case of music is partly similar. Music is an interesting case. Music, as Nattiez (1975) has written, has something fictional to it. Temporally oriented, charged with emotion, it is accepted (even as acousmatic music) by viewers of fiction. In continuity television, there is very little music. The bulk is visualized music in variety shows, or in some talk shows. There is very little music which is not visualized, and only visualizable. A good example is provided by the game show ‘Countdown’ (originally a French format called ‘Des Chiffres et des Lettres’). When the candidates are searching for the solution of the problem, there is a light, musak-type background music. This is visualized music in the sense that it is played in the studio, live to the candidates and to us together. It is unobstrusive, for the same reason that there is very little non-visualized music in continuity television. Music would take on a life of its own, be perceived as acousmatic, and definitely ruin the impression/illusion of liveness.

Continuity programmes cannot easily be divided into sequences on the basis of the work done by the apparatus of television, precisely because it aims at transparency. Editing, in particular, is supposed to be fluid, and switches between cameras should not create the impression of abrupt, unexplained switches between places and periods, as in a documentary or a fiction film. The voice, again, and, more precisely, the verbal, is the main criterion to analyse the flow of continuity television. Continuity television should be analysed with tools derived from conversational analysis, as initiated by Sacks et al. (1974). Television talk has its own rules of turntaking. The analysis should start with a major distinction, between routing turns (questions, requests, evaluations) and routed turns. The first belong, most of the time, to mediators: they have the privilege of routing and of addressing the viewers. Routed turns belong to guests, who are requested to respond to routing in an appropriate manner. A mediator talking can move from different types of turns, starting with a direct address to a viewer, and moving to a series of routing turns.

The voice in fully live or continuity television is visualizable, even if we do not see the speaker for a long period of time. The best example is the voice of the sports commentator, in the sequence we will call ‘involved commentary’. This sequence has specific phonetic features, besides its specific vocabulary. On radio, even in a language you do not know, you might identify the commentary of live sports, by its rhythm and prosody. If you know the language, the use of tenses, the variety of the deixis (personal pronouns, adverbs of time and place) are striking. Of
course, the voice of a live commentary can be recorded and broadcast later with the pictures to create the illusion of live television. This is especially the case for sports events which take place with a time lag. In France, some events of the Atlanta Olympics were broadcast in such a way, even though viewers were told before the broadcast that the events were not actually live. Less honestly, the French first channel TF1 broadcast a football match a few hours after the event, with the live commentary recorded, trying to beat the channel which had exclusive live broadcasting rights by acting as if nothing had happened. Another kind of involved commentary, less passionate than sports, can be heard during any sort of live event, from a major media event to more ritual live events, like the annual Bastille Day parade in France.

Be it for media events or for sports events, viewers can hear a voice without actually seeing the face of the speaker for long stretches of time. Why then claim that such a voice is visualizable? The commentator has a name, which is given in the credits, he has a face in many other programmes, especially in sports magazines, or in the coverage of television by the press. Most viewers know this face and can actually visualize a familiar personality when they hear the commentary. During the match or the event itself, it is not unusual to see, during the intermission, commentators with their headphones on their heads. This is not only a question of identifying the mediators. For the institution, the sequence where we see the commentators of the event is a way of guaranteeing the spectator that the commentators are actually commentating on the event, that they are part of the event, and not, like us, in front of their screen. No matter what the quality of the commentary, the commentator has to be a live witness. When, as for the Barcelona Olympics, it was reported that some journalists had been commenting from their hotel rooms, this was perceived as a professional failure and a breach of confidence.

**Edited (and non-fictional) television: documentaries and news reports**

In this article I have opposed continuity television to edited television: that is, to the programmes in which the after-the-event editing (not live editing) can be perceived and is perceived by all viewers. The editing is perceived at several levels. Visually, the shots connect unrelated times. Acousmatic music is also typical of edited television (fiction and non-fiction alike). Acousmatic voice, however, is a very specific case; it is the privilege of edited, non-fictional television. Edited non-fictional television is only represented by a small number of genres: documentaries, news reports, credits, advertising, music videos, propaganda (especially, in democracies, election programmes). Let us start with documentaries and news reports. They share many features, except for their relations with news and their length (the news report is brief, and has become shorter since its birth, while the documentary can be long). Furthermore, the documentary offers a good example of the evolution towards what is sometimes called ‘thematic television’, i.e. genres as channels.

News reports, but also documentaries (despite their ancestry in the cinema newsreels and cinema documentaries) are affected by their being television genres. A news report is, as Vianello (1986) has observed, something of a paradox: it is central to a genre which puts high value on being broadcast live, the news. Yet, most news reports are made of edited visual material – they are, at least visually, not live. The case of the voice in news reports is complex. The reporter’s commentary is mostly live, but sometimes recorded. Sometimes, a short report is delivered live by the anchor (this practice has become extremely frequent in the short news flashes of non-stop news channels). Within the news report, American television was the first to introduce ‘the stake out’: the reporter addresses his commentary to the camera, from the place of the ‘action’, opposite the Presidential Palace or the Court where the trial is taking place (Hartley, 1982). The voice is visualized. The ‘stake out’, following the professional term, actually is the sequence I have
already called addressed actuality. There is a question of who the reporter is talking to: the gaze is somewhat ambiguous, while the verbal indications (especially the use of the name of the anchor to signal the end of the 'stake out') seems to indicate he is talking to the anchor. Finally, we have the case, which we have already discussed, where news reports are often reduced to a voice added to the photograph of the correspondent.

With news programmes in general, especially before American professional practices started being imported, the 'voice-on news' has long been dominant. Let us refer to 'voice-on news' as the story delivered by a reporter off camera. The voice is visualizable: the name of the reporter is given in the credits, and many viewers have actually seen him on the screen. The story is edited, therefore the images are not live, but the voice can be live (it always was in the early days of the newscast). In short, a report within the news borrows some of the conventions of liveness, even though most of the time at least part of it is not live.

More surprisingly, the documentary, a genre born as an elaborated discourse on the world, not linked to news (Jacobs, 1971), has been submitted to the pressure of liveness when becoming a television genre, as has already been noted. Corner (1996: 2) writes that the documentary, having started as a 'cinematic essay', now mostly has the form of an 'expanded reportage'. The most obvious sign of this is the frequent occurrence of direct address. Many television documentaries, especially documentary series, include a mediator who addresses the viewers at regular intervals. Of course, these 'direct addresses' are usually not recorded in the studio. They might be shot 'on location' in places connected to the theme of the documentary. The viewer probably never assumes them to be live. And yet, the 'here and now' of the mediator's living gaze is here, an indelible indicator of 'presentness'.

The direct address is also quite frequently used before the documentary. A personality, usually a celebrity of some kind, is there to 'launch' it (as if it did not have enough energy of its own). In 1998, the long and very successful (and controversial) documentary series *Tkouma*, produced by Israeli television on the occasion of the country's fiftieth anniversary, was launched in such a way by famous public personalities. Again, the documentary might be about the past, but the 'launching sequences' show us a mediator using the present tense for proposing that we see something, tonight (to sit with him in the studio, maybe, and to watch together – therefore perhaps transforming all living rooms into one huge communal television studio).

Documentary, like news reports, can be easily divided into specific sequences. In documentaries, apart from the 'direct address', we find basically three different types of sequences: 'scenes', 'interview excerpts' and 'acousmatic commentaries' (or documentary voice-overs). Formally speaking, a scene is identical to a sequence from a fiction film: the characters 'play their own role', do not seem to pay attention to the camera (or, more exactly, studiedly do not pay attention to it). In television documentaries, scenes are rare, most likely because of their fundamental ambiguity. If we turn on our television set and discover a scene, it might take a little time for us to decide if we are dealing with fiction or with non-fiction. This ambiguity usually is quickly resolved. First, the style of shooting suggests either a documentary or a certain type of fiction that borrows from the conventions of documentary and news reports. Second, we quickly realize we have no major character, no plot, but only bits of 'real life'. Here is a major difference from the documentary tradition of the cinema: scenes are central, and were from the very start (what is *Nanook of the North* 'Robert Flaherty, 1922' but a succession of scenes?). Major documentary directors (Frederick Wiseman, Raymond Depardon) are famous precisely for using mostly or only 'scenes' of real life.

The same documentary directors exclude what is the staple of television documentaries: the interview excerpts and the acousmatic commentaries. The interview excerpts (with or without the interviewer's questions) are somewhat similar to the 'interventions' of continuity television.
However, they belong to a different temporality. The editing suggests someone engaged in recollecting a variety of encounters and presenting them to us. The interviewer might very well be, when there is just one, the documentary ‘anchor’, the one in charge of the direct address (even though he does not always do all the interviews). Interview excerpts (from documentaries but also from news reports) can be divided according to the category of interviewee, elite and vox pop following a division I have suggested (1982) independently from, but similarly to Hartley (1982). Elite interviews are named and might have a chance to have their voices turned into a voice-over, illustrated by some images (especially in documentary and current affairs programmes, where there is more time for the editing than in news reports). Vox pops, anonymous interviewees, are not named, are sometimes presented as groups (a series of brief interviews with similar questions, or group interviewing) and have much less chance to enjoy the political privilege of having their voices turned into voice-overs.

The most typical sequence of some documentaries, absent from news reports, is the acousmatic commentary. It is specific because the voice is a visual. The voice is less involved in talking to us than in ‘speaking a text’, with a grammar which is not that of spoken, improvised language. The credits might actually state: commentary read or given by, in cases where a famous actor has hired out his voice. That slow and static voice has some pretelevisual ancestors, between teaching and preaching. We could compare it to the voice of an invisible priest at the back of a temple. It is a voice of authority, which dominates the picture, in the name of a carefully prepared and recorded text. The question of the authority of the voice is central to television: be it in involved commentary, or in voice-over news, the absence of the speaker goes along with a sense that the voice knows, that it is there to explain, continually, the event or the story to us. The acousmatic voice still is, in all cases I have been able to observe, a male voice, sometimes called the ‘voice of God’, as Corner (1996: 29) has reminded us. Even more than for the direct address, the politics of the voice on television is heavily gendered.

Edited television: advertising, music videos, credits, propaganda

These four sequences seem to have little in common. We might well start with the credits, which have a lot to teach us about edited television in general. At the start, as in film, credits were musical sequences. As television became richer, and more competitive, credits have changed, using more images and increasingly complex editing. Credits have many functions, far beyond the naming of those who are given credit. They signal a recurrence: the same familiar programme is coming back to us. They vary according to genres, and also to location. Opening credits which try to draw us into the programme, use the whole gamut of visual and sound resources. Conversely, for many continuity and live programmes, the closing credits are often rolled over the silent set, where the viewer can see the host and guests, the newscaster and the interviewee, still talking. Just like advertising, credit sequences are a major place for trying out and experimenting with new techniques, such as digital effects and computer graphics.

Advertising and music videos are more complicated than credits. The regime of belief they establish stands somewhere between fiction and nonfiction. They are often built as little fictions, with a story sometimes related to the song for music videos. At the same time, the viewer is reminded that it is only a song: images of a story are interspersed with that of the band playing, or of the singer singing. In advertising, we are reminded that this is only an advertisement: the product is there, after all, to contradict the idea of an autonomous story. Not all advertisements are built as fictions. Many resort to a celebrity addressing the audience to promote the product.

Music videos might be interpreted as a complex generic configuration. Before they emerged, there had been filmed singers in variety shows or in musicals, always addressing the audience while
singing. They established the power of the song as a popular, semi-fictional genre. The singer both
tells a story and represents, through gestures and attitudes, the story for us. What is new about the
music video is the way the story is represented. Beyond a basic continuity (of the music, and, to a
lesser extent, of the singer's face), there is an extreme discontinuity of the editing (with, however,
an often cyclic use of the same series of shots in different locations). This discontinuity seems to
embody the power of the singer to become someone else through the music, and to create one or
several new worlds through his songs. We could define the music video as a rhetorical game
between sound continuity and visual disruption, which has created its own conventions: the
viewer expects the disruptions in editing, according to certain rules, but first and foremost we
have the presence of the singer. This modern form is easily combined with the archaism of
continuity television. The same disjoined singer is also interviewed in a studio, or on MTV, within
the traditional conventions of continuity shooting (save for the odd camera angles, which have also
created their own conventions).

The voice, the verbal

Whether acousmatic or visualized, almost all television voices have something in common: they
are at the service of verbal language that is clearly understandable, whether in sports commentar-
ies, in variety shows or in news. Even more than in the movies, there is not only 'vococentrism'
but 'verbocentrism' (Chion, 1994). The technology of the microphone and the work of television
mediators (hosts and journalists) are to a large extent used mostly to convert voices into clear
language. The 'in-between' situation, so frequent in real life, where voices are clearly saying
something, but something we do not completely understand, is banished from television, and
largely from films, with, again, some major exceptions (Jean-Luc Godard being one).

In continuity television, a certain dose of confusion can be tolerated, but within certain
(evolving) conventions. First of all, the moments of confusion are limited. After a row, the host has
to show he is in control again. Second, the confusion belongs to a certain sub-genre, the talk-
shows of tabloid television. In the 1980s, the American Geraldo, the French Droit de Réponse (Right
to Reply), the Israeli Polopolitika (Here is Politics), were debates where noisy rows were part of the
expectations of viewers, but within certain limits. Each has one or more famous episodes where it
went beyond its own limits, and had to fall back within the borders of the 'acceptable scandal' that
is part of their substantial definition as a genre.

Television voices are always clear. But there is more: television is always talking. That is a
convention which might be stronger than the social and moral conventions of what can be said:
something has to be said. On television, almost everything can be said, as long as television keeps on
talking clearly. News journalists are often said to be desperate when they have no pictures to
illustrate a major event. But the need for words is as pressing as the need for images. Silent images
are rare. Silent looks are even less frequent. This is probably an interesting zone which is rarely
transgressed. What is a silent look, instantly directed at your own eyes? It is heavily charged,
either positively (seduction), but mostly negatively (aggression, madness), as Barthes (1980: 175)
has noted. The doubt cannot be easily dissipated. We cannot interrogate the figure on the screen,
and react as we would do in real life, simply turning away or responding aggressively: 'why are you
looking at me like that?' The silent look brings us back to the absence of the characters on the
screen, and then to the fact that there is no event, no fact, only a flow of pictures. Television has to
use the voice to bring about a phenomenological presence as completely as it can.
Fiction, seriality, live television

Finally, although fiction (at least in today’s television) is no longer live, and sometimes only shot live (some sitcoms), it is influenced by the context of television. Let us start with famous television actors: beyond the fictional story on the screen, viewers can often follow, through television itself and other media, the real-life story off the screen. Behind the character, the actor is always there, much more than in the cinema. Some actors find this worrying. Others use it. Peter Falk is Columbo. In France, the actor Roger Hanin is the policeman Navarro (the character he has embodied for years in a famous crime series). The use of the name sometimes oscillates between the real-life name and the character’s name. In comparison with the movies, the suspension of disbelief is not quite the same. We might watch a story, but we also watch Peter Falk playing Columbo, knowing he will come back next week.

This process of actors being actors more than characters culminates in sitcoms. As much as it is a fiction story, we watch a theatrical representation being broadcast, aware of the presence of the audience (live audience or simulated audience through recorded laughter). The actors often play with a specific detachment, sometimes criticized as bad acting. In a famous French sitcom, the bad acting has interestingly been analysed as offering a chance for young viewers to identify more with the actor and less with the character. More precisely, it is as aspiring actors and stars that viewers can think of themselves as having more chance to participate, some day, in this kind of fiction than in fully fledged fiction (Pasquier, 1999). This hypothesis could be generalized in relation to many sitcoms and soap operas. The stereotyped or simplified way of acting, the heavy coverage of the real-life character by the media between the episodes, and the very duration of the series create a sense of real-life temporality, sometimes lasting for years, very specific to television. [..] Some viewers can actually view the whole flow of television as nothing but a life-long serial about the life of television celebrities.

Finally, television fiction can be affected by the phenomenon of liveness in another way. Watching television live is also watching non-recorded television. It is well known that viewers mostly record movies and series. The case of soap operas and sitcoms might be different: they might be recorded, but viewers who want to keep up with the series, especially if they share it with other viewers, might prefer to watch it live or with only a small delay. Watching fiction live may help us to become part of a specific interpretive community, and, beyond, of a national audience.

[...]

Live television as historical fulfilment

Why is it that the possibility of live broadcasting has remained so important, whereas the percentage of fully live television is actually small on general audience television? I do not believe in an essentialist view of technologies, nor am I a technological determinist. Rather, I think that liveness should be interpreted as a development within media history as a whole. Media technological history at least partly reflects an effort to reduce the gap between events and media users. It is intimately linked to a history of communication as speed, where we experience the rhythm of printing presses, the use of the telegraph by press agencies, the transmission of photographs, the circulation of films (by plane), then the circulation of video signals through transmission and satellite. Live broadcasting, in this context, is the quintessence of ‘news’, whose ‘discovery’ has been a major break in the history of the press, if it has not marked the birth of the modern press altogether (Schudson, 1978).
Why such pressure? I certainly do not want to privilege either a critical explanation, from the top down (the media economy has created a need for consumers), or a populist explanation, from the bottom up (liveness is a natural need for the modern citizen). Rather, there has been a mutual adjustment between technique, society and economy. From the top, major institutions have all used news, then radio and television liveness, to create a connection between the masses and events (thereby reinforcing mass sentiments). At the base, the need to connect oneself, with others, to the world’s events, is central to the development of the modern nation, as Anderson has noted (1991). [...]

This historical perspective may possibly lead to an explanation as to why most prophecies of the death of mass television have been repeatedly belied by historical evolution. Broadcasting has not yet been defeated by narrowcasting, particularly not by the ultimate form of narrowcasting, the VCR, which is supposed to give one a chance to free oneself completely from the constraints of scheduling. However, as is well known, the VCR remains subject to the programme schedule. The only exception is in the case of big immigrant communities who live in countries where they have no television channels in their own language, and resort massively to video consumption. However, most people still watch more broadcast (or even cable and satellite) television than video. Furthermore, video recording itself is used not to detach oneself completely from the channels’ schedules, but only for slightly delayed viewing of some specific programmes one is not free to watch on a specific evening. This explains why audience measurement systems can actually include part of the VCR viewing of a specific programme in their statistics, as in the UK where this is called timeshift viewing.

The taste for ‘live broadcasting’ (in the sense of ‘non-VCR’ viewing) can be related to the need to know others are watching at the same time. Furthermore, watching television ‘live’, even though one is dealing with the broadcasting of recorded programmes, offers a guarantee that, at any given time, the flow can be interrupted by a special newsflash. Thus, even when we are completely engrossed in a major fiction film, we are not completely cut off from world events. This possibility has been noted by theoreticians of liveness, notably by Mellencamp (1990). An example: on the evening of Itzhak Rabin’s assassination (November 1995), the French second channel was broadcasting a variety show, recorded as if live, a typical example of what I have called continuity television. At the time when the event was discovered, the show was not interrupted. However, the information was chromakeyed at the bottom of the screen, which created a strange sensation: what looked live was not really live. A tragedy was taking place, and the show’s participants kept talking happily. Of course, viewers particularly interested in the event could have always changed to CNN, LCI (the French non-stop news channel) or to radio.

The promise of liveness in contemporary television

Most of the aforementioned examples have been taken from general audience and national channels. Let us now qualify my initial claim that liveness will not disappear with the ‘new television’. Obviously, the multiplicity of channels and the increased competition and ‘choice’ they entail have some implications for liveness. The most talked-about aspect of this transformation is the emergence of ‘global news’. CNN and BBC World, even though they broadcast some magazines, promise the viewers regular news bulletins and instant interruption in case of the occurrence of a newsworthy event: they can be included in the long history of the rhetorics of live television. One cannot be certain that these transformations are about globalization, or mostly about globalization. In countries which have the capital, and when the cable market has matured long enough, producers create a national news channel, which is more successful than the
Anglo-Saxon or American model. Non-stop news channels are now broadcasting in France, Germany and Italy; many are planned in other countries.

The real change that CNN heralds is related to a different relationship with the nation, with television as a national enunciator. In the 1960s, it was the BBC (in the UK) or the ORTF (in France), which used the promise of live broadcasting. In the 1990s, it is international (and, increasingly, national) non-stop news channels. But, above the channels, there is a meta-enunciator: the national or private cable company marketing its services to the viewers. A non-stop news channel is always an important part of the promise of this meta-enunciator. Thus, Paris-Cable promises to Parisian viewers a ‘bouquet’ of channels, including both CNN and LCI. Non-stop news channels might not be the ones with the biggest audience shares, but they have another privilege. Studying remote control switching patterns might well show us that viewers ‘check up on’ the news channels regularly. If such a pattern is confirmed, live broadcasting might not be disappearing rather, it would be entering a new chapter in its history.

Note
This article was published in a shorter version in French in Réseaux 81: 61-78, 1997. It has its remote origins in a thesis written under the direction of Christian Metz, who was not only a fine theorist but the best of pedagogues.

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