

Piermarco Aroldi and Fausto Colombo (eds.), **Le Età Della TV. Indagine su Quattro Generazioni di Spettatori Italiani**, Milano: Vita & Pensiero, 2003, 268 pp, € 20,00, (hardcover).

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The theoretical premise of the book presented here is whether it is possible to study television audiences in the light of generational belonging in lieu of other variables normally used in the tradition of international Audience Studies dependent on socio-demographic factors such as class, gender, age, socio-cultural grouping and the features of the contexts of consumption. In other terms, the aim of the book is to understand if, and to what extent, individuals belonging to the same generation share the same media memories and histories of consumption, hence, share similar consumption patterns, which can be inferred when observing individuals' everyday media habits.

An approach of this kind boasts at least two different traditions. A sociological one, which dates back to the fundamental essay by Mannheim on *The Problems of Generations* (1927) and to a more recent study (Elder 1974, Bourdieu 1988, Wyatt 1993) on the processes of socialization and on the functions of the age groups in the definition of the social structure; and a less academic and historical one coming from the contribution made by generational marketing (Smith and Clurman, 1997) namely that approach to the market that classifies consumers on the basis of their membership of a particular cohort.

Aroldi and Colombo book is the result of a set of researches conducted during 1999 - 2001, funded by RTI Marketing Management (Mediaset) and led by *Osservatorio sulla Comunicazione*, a media and communication research centre based at Catholic University of Milan. The book wants both to report the co-editors' perspective on TV consumption habits in Italy (the first two essays by Fausto Colombo and Piermarco Aroldi respectively), and to provide the results of different researches and methodologies adopted (essays by Lorenzo Facchinotti, Anna Sfardini and Mariagrazia Fanchi).

All the work is based on two hypotheses. First of all, it's impossible to talk about a medium without implicitly historicising it. The Italian TV experience, for instance, from the 1950s up to the 1970s is completely different from the TV broadcasting system over the last two decades. After experiencing the first phase (the so-called "Paleo-TV," which was a public institution with a limited schedule and strongly pedagogic), the second phase (also known as "Neo-TV," which was commercial, flowing and entertainment-oriented) brings the audience to a completely different experience of the same medium. It's not only about two different media, it's about a radically changed media system. Within this new background, a main role has been played by new technologies, in particular by the Internet.

The second hypothesis is that childhood and adolescence are essential periods for setting the "media profile" of an audience: defining expectations, tastes, preferences, genre and textual familiarities, patterns of interpretation and all those features that every single individual refers to as a viewer/user. Avoiding any kind of mechanistic connotation (which is here out of place) we could possibly talk about imprinting: a sort of media alphabetisation, an approach to the media that sets consumption patterns and

defines future consumption habits of the audience. Imprinting is central to the construction of media diets, mostly relevant to the acceptance of interpretative frames; it is essential within processes of meaning negotiation and because it translates media products into relational sources (within family, society). This pressure, which can be more or less strong, but anyway constant, can define generational and personal identity of the audience members from the same age group.

This work-hypothesis requires the authors to point out some premises (two paradigmatic phenomena), which can be synthesised as follows. The first phenomenon can be considered as intergenerational, characterised by many interchanges and by processes of contamination between generations. Contamination in vertical relationships (parents-children) within the same household can lead the younger audience to appropriate media contents characteristic of the older generation. The second phenomenon can be considered as intragenerational, as it does not understate the age of individuals (biological age) and all the needs- related to age groups- that can be fulfilled also through the media.

Regarding the methodological dimensions, the project has been conducted by integration of different approaches: the socio-historical study to the cultural industry, the qualitative consumption research and the semiotic analysis of the texts.

According to the socio-historical approach to the Italian Cultural Industry developed by Fausto Colombo (1998), the book maps the media offer in Italy over the last 50 years. The aim of this mapping is to point out the gaps between different eras in Italian media and the programmes produced and broadcasted, without neglecting the wider context of consumption and the socio-historical national scenario. Taking the qualitative approach to audience studies and considering the problem from a theoretical point of view, Aroldi and Colombo can bring in concepts such as "media biography" and "media memory"; from a methodological point of view the study has been characterised by the use of instruments such as focus group (16 in total) and biographic interview (40 in total), which has to be considered within the map drawn from a desk reconstruction.

The results of the research point out the centrality of four different generation identities for defining the current Italian television audience, each one characterised by one's own media memory, expectations and narrative decoding. All this constitutes the experience fund with which people relate themselves with the television medium and construct the meanings of what they watch.

In order to access more easily to the results of our research, our review will be organised by focusing on two extremes within the same spectrum: the so-called "Nostalgic Audience" and the "Disenchanted Audience."

The first group actually contains two generation groups: people born between 1945 and 1952 together with people born between 1953 and 1965. Despite the long-time gap (two decades), all the members of this audience section share the same type of approach to the medium -approach that occurred during their youth (0-14)- in its early stages (Paleo-TV: 1954-1978). This phase was characterised by the monopolising coverage of public TV, by lack of broadcasting and scarcity of programs, by pedagogic contents.

The second section of the audience, "Disenchanted Audience," accounts for people born between 1978 and 1988: they approached the media during the neo-TV era (25 years), which is characterised by the boom of commercial TV (1978-2002).

For "Nostalgic Audience," television is at the centre of their media diets (very frequent use). It affects the consumption of other media: TV carries out a process of cannibalisation, it promotes media products and technological innovations. Within this diet, traditional media schedules are the place where users can draw practical and theoretical maps for the WWW. New media are, in this case, thematised within the traditional media schedules.

A more complex, rich, less static and less rigid media diet characterises the "Disenchanted Audience." On the quantitative side, television is still at the centre of their media diet, but it undergoes several processes of comparison and renewed interest for the traditional media (radio, cinema) and for the Internet. Two sets of criteria regulate the dynamic interchange from one medium into another.

As regard to emotional perception and involvement with television, "Nostalgic Audience" shares an idealised interest in the early-time television (before the monopoly was over). They tend to repress the development stages of commercial TV. Members of this section of the audience tend to compare the current broadcasting system to that of the past. Because of their experience, they don't trust the public medium as much as they did, but their emotional involvement is still high. This trend finds its roots deep into the memory of certain consumption contexts, such as family, together with the memory of some mythical titles, which are still used as standards for the interpretation and evaluation of the current offer.

The "Disenchanted Audience" lacks of historical perspective, together with idealising interest and emotional involvement. The younger audience is more knowledgeable of the media industry, genres and products which affects their "disenchantment." Their attention turns away from generalist broadcasting TV toward new technologies: satellite, Internet, mobile phones. This is reflected in their low emotional involvement with TV and TV programs, even if TV consumption is still intense. In this case, the approach to the medium is both critic and ludic, it's like a game among many others.

Moreover, if we consider specific television features apart from some generally acknowledged function, the "Nostalgic Audience" tends to be characterised by more specific features. For those people, spectatorship is an escape toward possible better worlds, it enables the audience to turn away from their context and to transform as well as to enrich it (*Escapist function*). Furthermore, especially between the 47-57 years-old age group, the story-telling feature of TV is here emphasised, TV is considered as a medium which is able to sing back the tradition of a community, witnesses its historical and social life, its roots, its shared cultural heritage (*Bardic function*). Eventually, between age group 37-46, TV is considered as the medium through which the family can spend time together, sharing the same experiences, socialising through viewing the same contents and experiencing collectively the atmosphere provided by the media (*Gathering function*).

The "Disenchanted Audience," among other features shared with older generations, privileges the *Ludic function* of media. Television is used as a relaxing source of entertainment throughout the day. Many

programs are watched at the same time just zapping from a channel to another, so that the nature of consumption converges with leisure and relational activities (both individual and group).

At last, the authors consider the narrative dimension, for finding that the imprinting of the "Nostalgic Audience" can also be recognised within taste choices. In fact, this section of the public prefers the novelistic style which portrays a pre-existing imaginative historical background, emphasised by genre features, intertextual quotes from the whole media literature (books, film, television programs). This style is characterised by a very strong psychological insight into the characters and their mutual relationships. These characters are round and the actors interpreting the roles tend to be credible (so that reality and fiction can even overlap). A great concern is accorded to the historical, geographical and social setting of the story. It represents a coherent system, full of connections with the collective imaginary shared by the members of the audience. Another typical feature is the occurrence of enunciative imprints within the text (the background or scenario, costumes, dialogs photography and lighting...). Everything relates to either the taste for the exotic (distant things in time and place: the past, journeys, adventures), or to the process of settling, which can be a psychological process-personal or social.

One of the typical features of the "Disenchanted Audience" is its strong bond with factuality: being able to simulate reality, social interaction and identity manipulation (i.e.: Big Brother). The narrative system is based on actions: every single character is unique because of its own know-how, which is essential for the structure of the plot. The main character is unique thanks to his/her skills: he/she is a performer, what he/she does is much more important than the values he/she possesses. Simulation of experience and the relevance of performance on values mark the interactive trait of these characters, directly or indirectly. The audience tends to be a prosumer or a player within the intermedia system.

In conclusion we could say that – even if we have not been able to reconstruct in an exhaustive way its contents in this brief review - the overall scenario that the book draws from the research work, as far as the sample size and the methodologies applied are concerned, is a good asset for audience studies in Italy.

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