

The Return of Fiction

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There has been a definite trend in recent years to prioritise a type of programming and production based on showing reality through the use of documentaries, reports, testimonial-based series and historical reconstructions, particularly on public television, through productions that seek to relate us to our history, memory and current environment. They give us lessons in sociology (*Veterinaris*), ideology (*30 minuts*, *60 minuts*, *Arte*) or identification (*Històries de Catalunya*) related to our surroundings. The idea is a programming concept established to propose that documentaries, reports and their different variants are more suitable and reliable formats for approaching reality, based on a consideration that the programmes that most interest and stimulate viewers are those that arise directly from reality, whether local (with reports on the attempted coup d'état of 23 February 1981), or global (e.g., the war in Iraq). This television trend is gaining ground in programming and is prevailing over fiction to the point that it has begun to replace it. News-based documentaries are today responsible for broadcasting, analysing and critiquing reality, while film productions have the role of entertaining and distracting viewers from the events that the documentaries show us. Programmers support documentaries over fictional productions to offer a vision that makes it possible to explore current events. Their proposal is a type of programming in which films are equated with spectacle and documentaries with investigation.

This process reveals a common confusion in thinking that fiction is a product of the imagination that uses reality to tell

a story, while documentaries are direct documents of reality that bring us face to face with past, present and/or future events. The idea is that fiction is wont to tell stories that are too over-the-top, too emotional, too violent or too fictitious to be able to increase our awareness of the key points of the times in which we live. In the author's notes to his book, *Harlot's Ghost*, Norman Mailer gives a clue about how we should understand fiction, of how it can help us open our eyes: "Good fiction (if it is achieved) is more real, more nourishing to our sense of reality than nonfiction...". Mailer suggests that fiction has a closer relation to reality, despite possible errors of information, and a greater ability to locate the viewer-reader closer not just to reality but also to the truth. The philosopher Julian Marias suggests that film fiction's greatest triumph is its enormous capacity "for apprehending reality", duplicating it and transforming it in an imaginative fashion. One example could be Julien Gracq's novel *The Opposing Shore (Le Rivage des Syrtes)*, which tells us more about the nature of war, conflict and the internal logic of power than Bob Woodward's journalistic piece, *Bush at War*, which focuses on relating the events that occurred in the Bush administration after the September 11 attacks in New York. Another example is David Lean's film, *Lawrence of Arabia*, which gives us a clearer view of the colonial processes in the Middle East than many reports and documentaries on the same topic. Through Lawrence's spiritual gaze of fascination and contradiction, Lean shows the complex relationship between East and West. The deluded Lawrence believes it is possible to build the East without conquering it, without appropriating it of its resources and identity. The documentaries broadcast before the war in Iraq that featured information, expert opinions and details of the people affected, channelled us further away from the heart of the issue, by presenting us with a reality that was divided

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between historical context and human life. A good argument for defending the idea that fiction has a greater ability to tackle the events that take place around us in more detail, even if not written about current times, can be found in an observation by Albert Camus: "Only the fictional novel remains faithful to the individual. Its purpose is not conclusions about life, but rather its very development". The news documentary, on the other hand, is forced to conclude, enlighten and instruct, and thus becomes a product or work that is closer to propaganda. Film fiction is more modest than television documentaries because it does not aim to give or remove reasons. Filmmakers and novelists, as Mailer suggests, "have a unique opportunity: they can create superior histories out of an enhancement of the real, the unverified and wholly fictional". If we add the words of filmmaker and ex-documentarist Peter Greenaway, i.e., "the documentary tells a big lie in pretending to be truth, while fiction, on the other hand, pretends to be a lie and ends up telling great truths", we have to ask why public television in Spain has made documentary-news-ideological-sociological programming the central element of its schedule to the point that it has established the following logic: television based largely on documentaries and reports is considered to be quality TV, as it offers a more plural vision of the world and more clearly meets that which we could label 'public service'. We have to question the choice of TV programmers who, like people who stock bookshops, have decided that on their shelves readers will only be able to find books on history, current affairs, essays, interviews, illustrations and the latest narrative best sellers, but not new or classic novels that fall outside their selection policy because they are felt to be too far removed from reality.

I believe that this programming/editorial line has been motivated (in the case of Catalonia) by the following:

1. The creation in Catalan film circuits of the phenomenon of fiction documentaries, which saw a great many good filmmakers turn to making documentaries to be able to experiment with and make works free from the traditional commercial circuits. This has led to an aesthetic criterion that sees some creators, producers and programmers identify the documentary format as a proposal of creation and the fiction format as a commercial product.

2. The fact that most public television executives come from the current-affairs department has led to film being

relegated to the bottom of their programming initiatives, turning the station into a medium that creates opinion through making and constructing reality.

3. The increasingly widespread trend of broadcasting films during prime time, with the purpose of entertaining and distracting viewers, which has led to an inaccurate association between film and evasion, as opposed to documentaries and commitment.

4. The feeling that quality movies are only enjoyed by film buffs and academics, leading to 'ghetto programmes' where experts talk to other experts and ignore the average viewer.

5. The low cost of buying and producing good documentaries and reports compared to the high cost of taking part in and buying film productions.

6. The predominance, marked by international events such as those of September 11, 2001, on a news-based view that has colonised all television opinions based on current affairs. We could even go so far as to say that television today revolves around giving opinions on rather than describing events.

7. The fact that television has opted for a local and 'own' vision instead of a global and universal one supports a narrow and slanted view of the world, in which by defending our view we sacrifice a more complex and complete view of reality.

8. The fact of associating documentaries and reports as a driving factor in society, e.g., the protests against the war in Iraq, which means that the information concept of television is more direct and effective in creating opinions, while fiction is more reflective and further removed from immediacy.

These are some of the elements that have resulted in public television in Catalonia today being represented and led by documentaries and reports. The all-encompassing film experience has been downplayed in favour of the fragmentary nature of the reality of documentaries.

The return to fiction is therefore a necessity, a commitment that has to be reoriented in order to offer a more plural and universal television that can locate viewers with regard to an issue and allow them to reach their own conclusions. We should not forget, as Marias reminds us, that the cinema as we know it today developed from the documentary (the Lumiere brothers): the sprinkler sprinkled, the train leaving the station, the passengers arriving at the station. However, it did not take long, in fact it was strangely quick, for film to

discover what its true reality had to be: fiction (Melies). Today, television must begin to introduce fiction as a basic element in understanding reality, because of its ability to make us ponder what will happen, what is happening and what has happened to us.

The return to fiction as a central element of programming will allow viewers to become reacquainted with the essentialness of what it proposes (when it is quality fiction), where meaning and expression are inseparable from content and form. A good part of current programming proposes formats in which the form becomes a predictable and exhausted embellishment, where it is more important to show than to understand. The return to fiction will make it possible to recover a balance in programming and provide viewers with a more complex and free reading of reality.