

POLITICAL TV TALK SHOWS ON GREEK TELEVISION:

Live broadcasting as an
ideological and cognitive frame

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ABSTRACT This paper presents a semiopragmatic analysis of the political talk shows on Greek television that reveals a symbolic conception of the TV studio and its value-attributing mechanisms through which principles of democratic dialogue are enacted inside this kind of social and media frame. Political talk shows create the notion of a complex temporality, larger than the concept of events presented live, affecting the political and social vision of the audience.

KEY-WORDS talk shows, live broadcasting, television, politics, Greece

1. Context, methodology remarks and corpus

The introduction of political debates to television indicates a specific way to visualize social space. The *genre* of television debate stands on the crossroads of two different rationales: conceptually it aspires to be part of the democratic process and pragmatically it is a television programme obeying to commercial criteria of the TV channel.

In order to consider political debates within their historical context, a short review of the evolution of Greek television might be useful. Television broadcasting began in 1966, just before the dictatorship of the colonels (1967-1974). The establishment of television under the dictatorship is characteristic of its role as an instrument in the hands of an autocratic and undemocratic regime. After the re-establishment of the parliament in 1974 and until the broadcasting deregulation in the end of the 90s, television remained under severe state control. Nevertheless, the genre of political debate makes its

appearance on Greek television screens as political dialogue is a democratic demand after a long period of abolition of the democratic regime. Television deregulation and the creation of private channels from 1989 and on symbolize a new era in media representation of the Greek public space and, more particularly, in the consolidation of television political programs. These programs are rapidly developed, occupying a strategic place in the general discourse of channels towards their public.

The scope of this paper is to comprehend the symbolic construction of the representation of democratic dialogue through television talk shows. The methodological frame of our analysis comprises both semiological and pragmatic disciplinary elements regarding televised discourse. The alternation of theoretical remarks with some television examples of talk shows in order to explicit the points of our analysis, chosen for their typicality among a corpus of Greek television programs dealing with political dialogue during the '90s, forms the structure of the present paper. Even though the analysis is based on 25 TV programs, which are corresponding to more than 102 broadcasts analysed (See VOVOU, 2000) our approach is not pretending to be exhaustive but based on pointing out some important tendencies as presented in Greek television talk shows that marked Greek televised discourse mostly in the '90s. Thus, it is part both of an historical and semiodiscursive perspective that aims to apprehend the evolutions of television and televised dialogue.

2. Theoretical frame: The sentiment of ubiquity and the contraction of time

Gilles Deleuze (1968) in his work regarding the relation between temporality and space notes that " it's in the present that time is unfolded. The past and the future belong to it [...] The past and the future do not suggest instants, discernable from an instant supposed to be at the present, but dimensions of the present itself while contracting the moments. [...] This is the paradox of the present: to form the time, but to slip in this constituted time."

The visual configurations of TV studio take life inside a more or less precise temporality. The temporality of television programs is considered as a complex notion: we consider it (1) as current time referring most of the times to the simultaneity of broadcasting and reception, (2) as time of the TV channel's construction and hierarchy

of programs and (3) as inherent time and rhythm of the program's evolution (See also JOST, 1999: 35-50). As far as television talk shows are concerned, the time element has an important role as it helps the programs to construct an intelligible mediation towards the TV spectator, related to present time. The live broadcasting of some TV programs is considered as an iteration, in the sense of a discourse rule establishing their regularity.

By internal temporality of TV programs we don't only refer to the formal organization of sequences. It is true that a program is conceived in order to occupy a certain time. The duration of a program influences the sense of the exchanges and determines their content. In other terms, it is a constitutive part of the message, as the distinction between content and form cannot attempt a complete dissociation of the polyvalent dimensions of the object of the study (SEMPRINI, 1997: 70). The organization of the enunciative process that includes the time element is not specific to television. We apprehend time as a 'cognitive frame', necessary to the receiver in order to understand the world. Time gives meaning and frames our acts, whether there are enunciative or not. This is the reason why television's temporality inside TV broadcasts is not to be considered only as the intention of the enunciator, but also as a semantic reconstruction of the spectator (JOST, 1998a:103-105). Following the reasoning of George Cheimonas (1984:18), "Time [Χρόνος] and Space [Χώρος] are opposite to conscience; conscience, essentially ecstatic knowledge, abolishes them, since conscience is present - a present that tends to be established for ever, beyond time and space [...]".

Recorded documents reproduce a reality that has been (BARTHES, 1964: 46-47). They remain an instant of the past that may help us to apprehend the world but don't implicate us in a process almost psychic, lying on the simultaneity of being and watching, that may, in certain cases be confused with participating and acting. The projection into a regime of action through the simultaneity of the receiving process may be assimilated to a kind of participation in the 'truth' of things. This may be resumed in the following proposition: 'since it's true that I am here watching (interlocutors or facts), what is happening inside the studio or in an external place is also true'. We then slip from a demonstrative regime into an operational and active one that, even if it remains a virtual one, it can fulfill the sentiment of being part of a certain level of political activity.

The live regime is in the heart of the enunciative norms of the political programs we study. The indexes of live broadcasting use, nowadays, diversified expressive modes, after being limited in the telephonic intervention of some political or other actors, or the broadcast of the program's telephone numbers (an unfulfilled promise of live participation of the audience). Nevertheless, our hypothesis is that live is used more like an identical 'vibration' shared between subjects being in different places (the TV spectator, actors in the studio and outside in duplex or multiplex connections) than a technical instrument. Live essentially resides in the promise (JOST, 1997:18-23 and 1998b) of authenticity and comprehension of the visible real, addressed to the public. Live broadcasting is part of the category of images that offer us a direct contact relation, a contiguity relation (following the distinction of signs made by Peirce: icon, index, symbol) with the TV studio and the outside world (PEIRCE, 1978). Thus, we must distinguish live broadcasting as a technical possibility and as a spectator's belief, as a promise 'rarely accomplished but always virtually present'; less as technical performance, but more as a semiotic and social phenomenon (BOURDON, 1998: 63)

In addition to that, we must denote that proof of live broadcasting of the television debates cannot always be verified. That is also the reason why we referred to live broadcasting not only as a technical performance but as a belief or impression of the TV spectator, following the intentional television discourse of the enunciator.

3. Empirical analysis

3.1. The aggrandizement of the host's role

Considering that the mass media are not unilaterally the expression of the prevalent culture but are also used to express the image of those producing or presenting the message, a closer look at the subjects of speech may turn out to be rich in theoretical hypothesis for the comprehension of the media function in society. In particular, as far as we are concerned, the mode of construction of the symbolic form of presentation on television provides considerable elements for the comprehension and knowledge of the socio-historical evolution of the medium in question.

The emblematic figure of the hosts of political TV talk shows takes an important place in television representations, providing an

identification of the program through them. The presenters of Greek political debates are journalists that are, progressively over the years, narrowly linked with their own talk show, becoming the main figure, an *image* of the program, a key element to its recognition and its immediate identification by the public; *in fine*, their brand value. They began to acquire an autonomus status during the 1980's. In the 1990's, with the appearance of the private television, the broadcaster's figure becomes even more pivotal and obtains a particular expressive significance in speech emissions and news bulletins. The program gets directly and inextricably related to the broadcaster, which was not the case, at least in a systematic way, at the beginning of television (VOVOU, 2000 and 2002). In order to understand the extent of this phenomenon, some program titles, containing or reminding by a phonetic consonance of the first or last name of their presenter are illustrative: "Anna in wonderland" (1991-93, on the public channel ET2, presented by Anna Panayotarea), "Ellispontos" (1995-96 on the private channel Mega, presented by Elli Stai), "Extremismi" (1997-98, on the public channel NET, former ET2, presented by Olga Tremi), "Teliki Eythia" (1995-1999 on the public channels, presented by Petros Eythimiou). The name of the journalists allows direct identification with them, without any serious semantic relation to the type of the program. Furthermore, in many programs of that type the host's face is visible in the titles, just before the opening sequence or offer written references to their hair care and clothing providers in the end of the program (for both sexes).

The messages provide us information not only about the issue in question but also about the subjects of speech. The personalization to a great extent of the programs *via* the host's person is comprehensible if one takes into consideration that the subject may be regarded as a vehicle of signs and symbols which can have various interpretations (see PEIRCE, 1978 and DELEDALLE, introduction to Peirce, 1978). The *face* is a particularly expressive part of our bodies, frequently to a greater extend than other parts of it. This enhances its semiotic function establishing a metonymic contact and exchange (See METAXAS, 1995: 240 and VÉRON, 1983: 111-112). Nevertheless, this does not mean that the broadcaster is just an instrument (a meta-enunciator) simply achieving contact between what takes place on the screen and the television spectator. The broadcaster incarnates a source of expression of the total message while at the same time he/

she is part of various levels of verbal and visual expression structured on the television screen. Therefore, the television scene is interesting as the place of devising a personality (see also SOULEZ, 2000).

Elli Stai is for the Greek television the emblematic figure of a presenter of TV political talk shows 'orchestrating' a complex time/space context inside her program called Ellispontos, broadcast on the private channel Mega between 1995 and 1996. This journalist is considered to have 'imported' in Greece the technique of double and multiple live connections, called 'windows' ('παράθυρα' in Greek) during her collaboration with the private TV channel SKAI in 1993-94.¹ Her talk shows represent the most typical example regarding the emphasis put on the broadcaster's face and the exaltation of the image of a journalist to a 'star'. In Ellispontos the complete identification and confusion of the program with the image of the broadcaster is everywhere, and first of all, in the show's title. The signature tune enhances this impression of total personalization of the program with the image of the journalist. The signature tune along with the visual direction of the show, the organization of the television plateau give the impression of an introvert imaginary place where the host is the only point of reference. This self-reference to the program, almost tautological mode of expression, creates a closed system whose center is the host. The latter is functioning as a human-like incarnation of the program *via* her visual treatment as the talk show's 'star'. The close up, enhancing this impression, the placement of a gigantic image of the journalist as the background of the program do not leave any space for doubt as to which is the most important message of the program to retain, its 'truth'.² The most recent talk show With Elli's eyes is presented in more 'personal' and 'intimate' style. The signature tune follows generally the same structure: the emphasis is put on the journalist's face and especially her eyes, which are followed by the television spectator in an imaginable way every time that she gives a look somewhere else. Besides, the title refers to the idea of truth (reached by the spectator through Elli's eyes, just like an eye witness). At the same time, the idea of direct contact with reality and with the television spectator is also, insinuated (see Jost, 2001: 62-78). Other political talk shows are registered in the same context of focusing the image on the journalist/host, (for example Extremismi with Olga Tremi, Face to Face with Nikos Hatzinikolaou and many others), without attaining though the level of Ellispontos.

In a general perspective, this kind of structure may give the impression of a dynamic approach of social and political issues. Nevertheless, this construction may shift to confusion. In that context the host's role becomes very important, as he or she represents the regulator of the discursive system. His status is valorized, as his figure is the only identifiable, the unique familiar reference inside the 'crowd' of interlocutors (both inside and outside the TV studio). The evident celebration of the presenter can be demonstrated in various occasions, such as close ups and the presence of the host's face in the titles of the program or in the blue box behind the studio during the program. In fact, the use of a blue box, the screens of the television plateau, and finally, the television itself as a medium, function as a mirror, turned to the television actors. A mirror, hence, i.e. an instrument allowing the subject not only to see how the others see it, but also to give the image it wants (in the sense of BOURDIEU, 1998: 96). In spite of the live broadcasters transferring us to the outside world, the space constructed is a closed locus around the prevalent host's image. This television choice implies another insinuated message, not focused on the production nor the representation of the truth, but on the image of the host. The intensive personalization dynamics (see SOULEZ, 2000) qualifying these programs overshadows any other possible information sources (invited persons, partners, reportage...).

3.2. The virtual "windows": the world as a network

The talk show's host has an uncontested authority on the audiovisual and oral exchanges on and beyond the TV studio. He/she incarnates the central figure that organizes the relations and shifts between spaces and temporalities in the studio (recorded reporting or interviews for example) and, therefore, the comprehension not only of reality but also of the structure of the program (VOVOU, 2002). The architectonical organization of the visible on the screen, where, in the centre, the journalist is the set point of reference, contributes to the personalization of information to a great extent. In this context, the live broadcast is considered to be intensity and extended conscience of the television process rather than an element of the current events, implying a kind of holistic almost timeless omnipresence. In this imaginary (but intensive, from the standpoint of conscience) locus of the television plateau focused on the host, the conception of the world becomes that of a network of mostly self-referring relations.

Television talk shows involved dialogue in a studio between the journalist and, four to six guests. The live connections via the virtual windows are quite omnipresent not only with special guests, but often with three, four or more interlocutors, outside the studio and in different places. The articulation of dialogue exchanges is seriously influenced by the programs' structure, as the interference of spaces is permanent. The digital, almost, esthetics that characterize the scenography of the studios and their live connections, resembling sometimes computer screens, dissolve the illusion of a profundity of the studio, by transforming it into 'a nowhere place, therefore an everywhere place' (JOLY, 1993: 84). In fact, the absence of a spatial anchorage, (inscription) affects the symbolic dimension of this kind of programs.

These elements insist on a strong virtual dimension of all the programs' studio. The latter, do not represent to the eyes of the TV spectator a real and tangible topos inside which individuals gather in order to discuss. On the contrary, it corresponds to a virtual space, connecting to other spaces. In that sense, the TV studio resembles more a network of speech, than a delimited space or a dialectic procedure. Therefore, it becomes difficult to distinguish causalities and, more importantly, the origin of the real spaces of power which exist behind the network. According to J.P.Esquenazi, this effect results from a liberal conception of democracy: 'the civic subject is characterized by his belonging to certain 'spaces' (family, institutions, profession, etc); the liberal subject is characterized by his capacity of being part of a network' (ESQUENAZI, 1996: 188-189).

The visual aspect of the studio, resembling a network, does not harm the 'authentic' element of the situation, which is to be found in the expectations of the public. The condition of the external guests is similar to that of the public, if we consider that the latter is inside a possible 'window', potentially connected to the studio. Its situation is similar, except of course from the detail that TV spectators do not have the possibility of speech. This detail is of a capital importance for the promise of television interaction that always remains unrealizable.

Moreover, this way of filming oral interactions and dialogue marks a rupture in the traditional practice of filming TV debates, which are the reverse shot and the sequential linearity. Instead of a linear cut that follows the chronology of exchanges, we have an un-temporal one, produced by superposing the virtual 'windows', creating a

permanent present, combining all elements and spaces. The frontal presentation of the interlocutors (both in and out of the studio) inside these windows, creates the impression of an ideal and unique point of view, omnipresent, that refutes possibility of exchanging looks between the interlocutors.

This visual organization of the space is also an ideological one that interferes with our intellectual perception. The filming procedure of the live connections and the virtual 'windows' refer directly to the architectural and optical concept of Bentham called the Panopticon explained in his applications by Michel Foucault (1975), and amply used by researchers which reversed the concept in order to explain television discourse and rules of enunciation. J.-P. Esquenazi introduces the concept of the holographic room in order to explain the function of the TV studio as a hologram that includes objects and elements existing both:

- outside the room, belonging to the world
- and inside the room, because these objects and elements appear without having entered the room, as like emerging from this undefined 'inside' (ESQUENAZI, 1996).

Placing the TV spectator as an observer of what is happening inside and outside the studio, seems as like his status has being promoted to a superior level, superior even to the participants in the debate because they don't have a global vision of the situation they are into. This feeling of omniscience is quite illusive because this posture may satisfy a desire to supervise, yet the second clause of 'omnipotence', or, for what matters to our object, of response and participation to the television process, remains unfulfilled. The TV spectator can observe but doesn't have nor the control nor the power to interfere into the program's procedures. Thus, the desire to be present everywhere at the same time is amputated and constrained in the satisfaction of a simple viewer, or, in that of detaining certain knowledge, without having the power to act. Boltanski in his work denote the dissociation of contemplation from action. Using the old theatrical metaphor in order to define the public sphere, this author remarks that "society is a scene on which every one is acting a role and simulates for his interest a reality that does not exist. This critical position, whose trace we can find from Antiquity till contemporary sociology (for instance in Goffman) can take different forms, more or less radical..."

(BOLTANSKI, 2007/1993 : 60). He distinguishes a change in the use of this metaphor from the 18th century when it would no longer have been applied on social subjects as actors; on the contrary, the focus would have been on the social subject as a spectator. The latter would have the possibility of seeing everything without being seen. For Boltanski this new kind of spectator observes from 'nowhere' the actors and their spectators (BOLTANSKI, 2007/1993: 62).

This is reinforced by the fact that modern representative democracies tend to become 'opinion democracies' (see TAGUIEFF, 2002/2007:12) and, therefore, the category 'people' is to be comprehended within various and divergent contexts (TAGUIEFF, 2002/2007:70). However, the absence of civic and political action is not imposed on individuals only by television. It is part of a more general conception, according to which things happen despite us. Consequently, the upper level of action would be to observe. In that context, information or political discussion and dialogue do not represent a way of becoming involved in the social process, but become themselves an aim, deprived of its effective value.

3.3. Live temporality, the myth of 'raw' information and the hierarchy of speech

Our demonstration and analysis will be completed from that point with a less apparent and less evident, though significant, aspect emerging from the use of live broadcasting and from the complex unity of different spaces and temporalities inside the TV studio. Up to this point we considered live broadcasting as an holographic room magnifying the host's figure and focusing on the 'network' aspects of the studio. We would like, now, to examine the thesis that live broadcast is an extremely efficient source of information. On the contrary, we suggest that the importance of live doesn't reside in his potential of delivering 'pure' information. Some typical examples illustrate this:

Our first example focuses on the program The Hour of the Truth of November 29th, 1995, presented by Yannis Pretenderis on the private TV channel Antenna, dedicated to the worrying state of health of the Prime Minister at the time, Andreas Papandreou, hospitalized at Onasseio hospital. The program consists of a debate between politicians and journalists and many live connections from the hospital, throughout the talk show. However, the live connection from the hospital does not

offer additional information. The presenter asks the reporter from the hospital: 'Is there anything new after the press release announced at 8 am?' And the reporter responds: 'No, they isn't', before recycling the information communicated during the day.

In the same frame of reflection, the idea that images presented live are true, raw, or in our example, immediately understood, is not corresponding to the reality of the reception. In the same program, the debate is interrupted by the live broadcast of images showing people gathered outside the hospital, clapping hands and shouting the slogan: 'Andrea you are alive, you are the one that guides us'. Without any oral comment or explanation on these images, one of the participants in the debate expresses a rather negative opinion concerning the public, considering its reaction as a reaction fitting to football games and gatherings. Later on, during the program, we are told that the public's reaction was due to the passage from the 29th to the 30th of November, the latter being the day that Greeks celebrates St Andreas, after whom the Prime Minister was named. Thus, the clapping and shouting were the public's way to express wishes for recuperation. This reveals that live broadcasting isn't informing us of the 'raw' reality. The meaning of the live sequences is reconstructed and can have various interpretations, in different times. This example demonstrates also the relativity of the idea that images (live or recorded) have superior possibilities of presenting information compared to verbal enunciation. In fact, television images are rarely presented to us without verbal discourse. For what matters to our study, live broadcasting regarding television debates is to be apprehended as a constitutive intrinsic element of a space network constructed on different levels and not necessarily as an informative mechanism.

Another program taken as an example of the relation between information and live broadcasting inside political talk shows is taken from Face to Face of January 30th, 1996, a debate dedicated to the crisis between Greece and Turkey about Imia.³ After the live connection in order to listen to the press conference of the Minister of Defense G. Arsenis, the impression of assisting to the diffusion of the information on live is, somehow, broken. Back to the studio, the presenter, Nikos Hatzinikolaou, affirms: 'it isn't right to say so but we, here in Face to Face (referring to his program) had heard previously these declarations of the Minister, during the telephone interview we

had with him'. This passage indicates the subtle difference between a mechanism of presenting the real and that of the verisimilitude. Even if the TV spectators are informed of the Minister's declarations on live, there is, however an intentionally organization of time. The presenter reveals these various temporalities inherent to the talk show, demonstrating that a live program does not mean a non-organized one.

In addition to that, this example indicates a distance between those who have information, politicians and journalists and, consequently the power to dispose it, on one hand, and the public/citizens, on the other, distinction we find repeatedly and in various forms at TV political talk shows. The illusion of being part of the creating process is dissolved. In every occasion, the presenters of TV talk shows affirm their superiority regarding the public and they 'put him back to his place', out of the holographic room, implying repeatedly a certain hierarchy of authorities.

Conclusion

In this paper, we tried to apprehend some organizational aspects of live broadcasting as ideological frames, constitutive of the comprehension of exchanges inside the studio. This reveals a symbolic conception of the television political talk shows in which principles of democratic dialogue are enacted. The live mechanisms, included most of the time in the presentation on the TV screen of virtual 'windows' aren't just a technical mechanism. On the contrary, they try to offer to the TV spectator an ideal point of view and a strong sentiment of contrived authenticity. They are inherent to the regularity of the debates, as well as they are continual and iterative. This iteration helps in making the visual mediation transparent (JOST, 1999:63). In fact, the more authentic live moments are those that appear in the absence of an elaborated technical tool. An intervention in a 'window' is surely prepared and intentional. The fact to broadcast an image presupposes more an enunciative intention because of the technical preparation needed. The spontaneity of a telephone call, for instance, is more probable and credible, when it creates a break in the predicted evolution of the program.⁴ The discourse of a program isn't determined by technical performances but it is the result of a complex assembly of diverse sources of enunciation. Thus, live broadcasting is not to be apprehended as a technique but as a

constitutive element, constructing the television discourse. The time element is integrated in the studio and becomes holistic and intense gaze resembling ubiquity.

Consequently, the idea of public space as a normative space of dialogue and discussion dominated by Reason finds its limits as a conceptual model in order to apprehend and explain the way that society operates. In opposition to that, the idea of the existence of a symbolic public and political space, apprehended like a complex dramaturgical space, like a space of appearance⁵ within (a) network relations to different spaces of action are developed, (b) the journalist/presenter appears as a host of a television ritual and (c) the production of news is simulated as 'natural' or 'transparent', seems to be a more adequate one for the analysis of the multiple elements of television discourse in relation to politics and society.

NOTES

- 1 Furthermore, she is professing her complete belief in what she calls 'the power of the live', considered to be, using her own terms, the 'soul' of television debate. (In an interview accorded for the purposes of our research. See also VOVOU, 2000.).
- 2 The Greek journalist Elli Stai was inspired the model of television broadcasting from the French political TV talk show called Sept sur Sept, presented by the journalist Anne Sinclair till the middle '90s. The difference is observed in the fact that the Greek journalist focused in a much more larger way on the personalization of the show and on the aggrandizement of the host's figure.
- 3 Imia is a small Greek island in the Aegean sea which Turkey claimed to be part of her territory. This incident had seriously endangered the relations between the two countries on 1996.
- 4 The example of Face to Face of July 2nd, 1998, when the Minister of Justice at the time, E. Yannopoulos, leaves the studio in the middle of the show after an undesirable phone call of the deputy of the opposite party Prokopis Pavlopoulos, who asked to respond to the Minister's accusations, is quite demonstrative.
- 5 See Arendt: 1958.

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