Television, Critisism and the Wow Factor

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Sometime in the late 1990s, Maarten Reesink took part in a forum on various forms of reality and 'emotion' television, organized by the University of Maastricht. The two other forum participants were Frits Abrahams, then the *NRC Handelsblad* newspaper's regular television critic, and Pieter Storms, maker of the notorious consumer advocacy programme *Breek ijzer*, who took offence that a scientist would label his programme 'emotion television'. No offence was intended, Reesink argued, for 'emotion television' can in fact have all sorts of positive qualities – something Abrahams, on the other hand, felt to be nonsense: one should not justify something that is bad, certainly not as an academic. You will have guessed that the discussion lasted late into the night, too late to head home all the way across the country, which is why the organization had reserved rooms for all the forum participants in the adjacent three-star hotel.

The next morning, Abrahams, rightfully considered by many to be the best television critic in the Netherlands, announced that now that he had slept on it, there was something, after all, in science's more nuanced view of the new genre. And in fact, in the time he had been a television critic, he had never opened an academic book about television. Nor was he about to do so: his career as a television critic had nearly run its course, and, far more significantly, he was no longer able to absorb such a completely different view of the medium of television. That other vocabulary, those new perspectives, all those nuances and aspects would have to be left to a new generation of critics to take up.

TV Know-How?

This, however, has not come to pass. In 2001 Marieke van Leeuwen graduated with a thesis entitled *Kwaliteit ontketend: argumenten voor een nieuwe televisiekritiek* (Quality Unleashed: Arguments for a New Television Criticism). It is the report of a content analysis of all television reviews in a selection of national and regional daily newspapers in the Netherlands over a period of one year. The results are revealing: for 12 months, there was not a single positive review of a programme broadcast on a Dutch commercial channel in any of these newspapers. There was scarcely any attention at all paid to the commercial channels: the television critics displayed a disproportionate amount of attention to news and culture programmes by the public broadcasters. The majority of the reviews consisted of strictly personal opinions and focused, virtually exclusively, on the content of the programme offerings. Little attention, if any, was paid to the aesthetics or the impact of the television programmes.

As a rule, literature, classical music and even films are discussed by people who are well-versed in these disciplines. But anyone familiar to any extent with the views of the French cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu understands what constitutes the basis of television criticism: the articles are a fairly representative reflection of the sociocultural preferences of a specific professional class, which is considerably coherent along a number of lines (for instance education, ethnicity, gender). Add a pinch of elitism if necessary and a few grains of social desirability, and an explanation for the unearthed results begins to fall into place. (Bourdieu, incidentally, did not display much understanding of television in his essay *On Television*.) [1] In order to give their columns – for that is what these reviews essentially

were – some added value, Dutch television critics have opted en masse for the humorous approach. With a few rare exceptions, our professional couch potatoes are without a doubt the funniest guys in the room. Puns and other witticisms, bizarre comparisons and the most creative of segues, nothing is too crazy for the Dutch scribblers. There is one downside: these extremely pleasurable, highly readable pieces too often demonstrate even more superficiality than the programmes they condemn.

What Is Quality Television?

Yet a change seems to be gradually taking place in the nature and tone of television reviews. Commercial and popular programmes are being increasingly taken seriously. In April 2007, at the presentation of the Lira Award for best television drama, jury member and television critic for the weekly *De Groene Amsterdammer* Walter van der Kooi even said that some commercial drama productions were 'absolutely worth watching. Net 5's *Evelien*, in particular, based on the character created by Martin Bril (directed by Rita Horst, written by Karin van der Meer) proved to be a welcome newcomer.'[2] Conversely, some critics are occasionally expressing criticism about the uninspiring quality of serious programmes such as the news and discussion programmes *Buitenhof* or *Nova*. In the newspaper *de Volkskrant*, Wim de Jong even attempted to describe his positive feelings at watching a new kro reality series, *Gezellig naar de Krim* (Happy campers on the road to the Crimea, more or less).[3] A good illustration of the limits of the profession's vocabulary of quality is that he did not get much beyond indicating what the programme is *not*. It is not an 'emo-format'. No one gets killed. No one has to get voted off because money has to be made off text messages from the call-in audience. No farmers or other desperate singles are matched up, no long-lost lovers are reunited. And there was not even any participant 'who had to address the camera in isolation in order to share his or her private feelings about the group process with the viewers at home.'

Reviewers apparently still find it difficult to identify the qualities of new genres such as reality soaps. In that they are not alone. Television makers have not figured this out either. How are we supposed to label the aesthetic qualities of *De Gouden Kooi* (a *Big Brother*-like show with millionaire participants), or explain why hundreds of thousands of people watch with bated breath as pop singer Frans Bauer puts up a picture in his house on his reality show? The explanation for this is that we actually do not really know how to judge quality on television: there is no vocabulary with which to discuss it, and there is not even the beginning of a framework within which you would be able to. To judge news and background pieces, therefore, we resort to values and standards developed within journalism; for drama we can appeal to all manner of quality criteria from the world of the cinema and the theatre. But when genres begin to cross over (which is increasingly the case in television), or worse, when television starts to develop genres of its own that do not have origins in other media or disciplines, we are at a loss for words: how in heaven's name can we then still recognize, let alone judge, quality on television?

Is Quality Good?

As a rule, quality is considered a positive term; it is a recommendation to watch or listen to something. For the VPRO broadcasting organization, Irene Costera Meijer, with several researchers and a large number of students, looked into the meaning of 'quality' for the audience. [4] We concentrated our survey on the group that is the vpro's quintessential target audience, higher-educated, vocal citizens, a.k. a. the 'quality audience'. Our respondents included television reviewers and columnists. For this group, quality was automatically linked to certain informational genres. 'Ordinary' viewers were not so sure about the word 'quality'. They too connected quality with serious informational programmes, but also with 'boring' and 'slow'. The fact that a programme was known as a 'quality programme' did not always prove to be a recommendation. 'Quality' was seen by a large proportion of the audience more as a genre characteristic of serious drama and serious information than as a neutral evaluation dimension that would induce them to watch. The viewer associates quality with good and important programmes, but not necessarily with interesting or appealing ones.

Quality as Experience

In the conventional understanding of quality, the quality of a programme is measured by intrinsic or content-based aspects of programmes. In this context, a news programme is considered to be of quality, for instance, when it fulfils the essential criteria of quality journalism.

"Tessa (36, administrative assistant): Zomergasten (an interview programme), Thema-avonden (evenings of themed programming on the public channels), Tegenlicht (a documentary series) and Buitenhof (a news discussion programme) are programmes that go in depth, provide greater insight into people, society. And provide critique. "

From this standpoint, media users want television, radio and internet to keep them 'up to date' and 'inform' them about what is going on in the world. Without good information, after all, one cannot be a good citizen.

"Wessel (65, television critic): Look, I cannot do without the NOS Journaal (the public broadcaster's nightly news programme), even though I am very critical of it, but what can you do. .. The same is true of Buitenhof. I find Buitenhof an unbelievably boring programme, but important things are said in it."

The label of 'boring' for the *Buitenhof* programme illustrates how even television critics are gradually adopting new standards of quality for informational programmes. This is echoed by a VPRO programme maker: '*Tegenlicht* is good and respectable. But it's like with a man. Good and respectable is often boring as well.' While television viewers (continue to) deem *Tegenlicht* a quality programme, they would like to see it be 'more fun', 'lighter' and 'more entertaining'. This is not so much about the issues, incidentally, as about their presentation and treatment.

"Marieke (25, physical therapist): It [Tegenlicht] is rather dry, so I do think a little bit of entertainment wouldn't hurt. Not when it comes to the issues they cover, because that really is hyper-super . .. You shouldn't joke about that, but there are items, for instance, with which something fun could be done. Or just a light documentary made about it. Something that's just outlined and not gone over with a super-critical light."

Viewers have become more critical and are making greater demands of television. A programme, as Costera Meijer showed in an earlier survey, should not only be informative, or well-made – it should also be gripping. [5] A programme has quality if it manages to 'touch you', 'grab you', 'inspire' you, 'trigger' something, 'fan the flames a little', 'grab you by the throat', 'touch you emotionally', 'do something to you', 'arouse emotions', allow you to

'get caught up in it', be 'moved' by it. This is just a small sample of the words used by our respondents to make clear when they felt a programme was good.

"Wim (50, film maker): I don't have much use for yet another documentary explaining how the bio-industry works. At a certain point I've had enough . .. It doesn't shock me enough. What I would find more interesting is contrast. I love that. Show how our agricultural surplus is used to produce energy, to produce electricity. Contrast that with a story about the famine in the Sudan . .. That's when it gets really intense and you see how out of balance it all is."

These higher standards set by viewers coincide with a general trend scientists identify as the shift from an information society to an experience society. People are no longer looking for pure information from the media; instead they want newspapers, magazines and broadcasters to make them experience something that stimulates their imaginations. The normative criterion for quality shifts from 'informed citizenship' to the 'quality of life'.

Feel-Good Quality and Wow Quality

Henry Jenkins connects quality with the 'wow climax'. [6] If a programme has you sitting on the edge of your seat, this experience can stay with you for a long time.

"Hans (44, photographer): That's the way it was in De wandelende tak (a radio programme on world music) and this was a very beautiful sound excerpt someone had taped in New Guinea, I think . .. Because someone had died and the song was about that. And you heard it slowly come up the path and then fade away. Now that was such beautiful, atmospheric radio. And yes, that touches me. It's been really ten years ago, uh, now maybe I'm exaggerating, but it was definitely six years ago or thereabouts. So it was that long ago and I can still remember it so well."

The respondents we interviewed distinguish two kinds of quality experiences in this context. We use the term 'wow experience' for the experience of being completely caught up in a programme (comparable with the experience of computer game players) and the 'feel-good experience' for the experience of simple relaxed enjoyment. We describe the 'wow experience' as a quality *effort*, comparable to Maslow's peak experience. [7] The 'feel-good experience' is about quality *relaxation*. Yet according to the audience, this quality too contributes something to their lives. Such a programme is easy to watch or listen to, it absorbs, does not irritate, because it is well made. It represents experiencing pleasure without requiring too much energy and attention.

"Lizette (25, project manager): I like De wereld draait door (a daily discussion programme) and watch it often . .. I find it a pleasant programme to watch after a busy workday. It's light, but it deals with real issues. Unlike RTL Boulevard (a daily gossip programme), for example, which is broadcast at the same time."

Relaxed enjoyment is not the same as simple diversion. Our respondents are quite honest about this: they too watch programmes or channels just to kill time on occasion. Programmes like *Big Brother* and *Jensen!* (a 'shock jock'-type talk show) and youth-oriented radio station *FunX* were cited in this context. Fun every once in a while when you don't feel like doing anything, but you don't stay home for it, you don't feel involved, you don't record it and seldom give it your full attention. For children, cartoons often fulfil this function of 'killing time'.

If the existing content-focused vocabulary of quality were to be expanded by means of an experience-focused vocabulary, television critics might have more tools with which to provide us, as viewers, insights into the significance of programmes. Whether a programme has quality can then no longer be determined solely from its content. Quality

is also demonstrated by the experience of the programme. Does it contribute something to the quality of life? A really good programme does not have to lead to questions in parliament, but it should add something of value to the communication within the community for which it is intended. It facilitates and supports self-determination. The relationship of the programme maker with his or her subject can also be judged in more dimensions. The use of words like 'critical' and 'independent' indicates a content-focused idiom of quality; 'grounded', 'involved', 'inspiring', 'personal' and 'self-reflecting' indicate an impact-focused idiom of quality. In the former, when the approach to a subject is discussed, dimensions of classical journalism such as 'objective', 'neutral', 'rational' and 'nuanced' automatically come up. They do not even have to be cited. When the approach is aimed, on the other hand, at the viewer's 'passion' and 'compassion', and demonstrates colour instead of shades of grey, the programme maker is quickly judged to have let him or herself get carried away by his or her subject, or have failed to maintain sufficient distance. Perhaps reviewers (but also programme makers) might alternate their critical tone once in a while with inspiring, unique and enthusiasm-rousing stories about programmes? We expect a broader vocabulary of quality to improve the quality of television

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Maarten Reesink (NL) has been affiliated since 1993 with the Media & Culture (formerly Film and Television Studies) Chair Group at the Universiteit van Amsterdam, where he was involved in the development of the television studies specialization. His own specializations are reality television and infotainment.

Footnotes

1. Pierre Bourdieu, *Sur la télévision* (Paris: Raisons d'agir, 1996) transl. as *On Television* (New York: The New Press, 1998).
2. Walter van der Kooi, 'Het niveau. De lira-nominaties van 2007', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 9 May 2007.
3. Wim de Jong, 'Sleurhut', *de Volks krant*, 20 June 2007.
4. Irene Costera Meijer, et al., 'De ervaring van kwaliteit'. Part of the research report *De Magie van Kwaliteit* (Hilversum: vpro/uva, March 2007).
5. Irene Costera Meijer, *De toekomst van het nieuws* (Amsterdam: Otto Cramwinckel, 2006).
6. Henry Jenkins, *The Wow Climax. Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture* (New York/London: New York University Press, 2007).
7. Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Television and the Quality of Life. How Viewing Shapes Everyday Experience* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1990).

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