When we talk about media audiences, be it radio, newspapers, television or more recently the Internet, the first thing that comes to mind is audience measurement. The main purpose of a media is to attract as many people as they can in order to sell ad spaces to companies. In France, the institution in charge of this is called Mediametrie and was created in June 1985. The creation of Mediametrie came in a context of mutation of the French television landscape (launch of Canal +, the first French pay-per-view channel, the creation of the VCR to record programs that allow TV viewers to create their own programming and their own temporalities). In this context, audiences are seen as a part of a market that producers have to reach and to seduce with their programs. Of course, there were many studies and researches on radio and newspapers (see for example Deleu C., Les anonymes à la radio. Usages, fonctions et portée de leur parole, 2006). But, as my main research interest is television and how new technologies change both the televisual landscape and TV viewers’ cultural practices, I will focus this short overview on reception studies in France and television issues.

In the 90’s, French theorists and media scholars began to take interests in the so-called activity of the audience and started analyzing how audiences perceived and interpreted media messages and how they dealt with it. In 1993, a special issue of the journal Hermès, published by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (National center for the Scientific Research), focused on audiences and reception studies and entitled its special issue: “à la recherche du public “ (researching the audience). The aim of this issue was to argue that any audience theory implies a
television theory and therefore a representation of the society. Each contributor analyzed the social link that is visible between audiences. For example, in his article “la télévision du pauvre : la participation du public” (poor man’s television: audience participation), Eric Macé wrote about game shows on television and popular audiences: “focusing on game show audiences, this paper shows that far from being imposed from ‘on high’, the format of these shows actually fulfils the participatory needs of popular audiences. That it does so raises however the question of whether television might not act as a substitute for other- social, political- forms of participation”. Later, in her analyze of the teen soap opera Hélène et les Garçons, sociologist Dominique Pasquier chose to look at how teen girls watched the show and tried to understand the importance of the show in the socialization of these girls. She used a three-point methodology. First, she read the letters sent by fans to the production or the actors of the show. Then she gave an open questionnaire to these viewers. Finally she watched the show with them in their homes, sometimes with their parents. Thanks to this ethnographic methodology (a la David Morley), she managed to highlight the interactions between fans themselves and between fans and the show. Another sociologist, Dominique Mehl, defined the concept of ‘télévision compassionnelle’. She argues that, in the 90’s, a new genre appeared on TV, the reality-based shows. According to her, ordinary people used these shows as a catharsis for their passion or losses. Ordinary people participated in various shows live on stage or on the phone, as witness in police cases, or in family drama for example. Their voice was a form of audience participation as well as a form of catharsis for them. The apparition of Loft Story in 2000 marked the end of neo-television and we entered what Ignacio Ramonet calls the post-television era. For Dominique Mehl, a new contract is signed between shows and their audiences: a ‘pacte relationnel’. The Post-television era is symbolized by the blurted borders between fiction and reality, between privacy and public life and by much greater audience participation via text messages for instance in order to vote. Loft Story (Big Brother) introduced the use of new technologies (the Internet, mobile phones) and real-time audience participation, which lead to the implementation of interactivity in French programs. Following this new paradigm, media analyst Jean-Louis Missika predicted ‘the end of television’. For him, television would disappear in its current form and programs would be available on different media platforms such as laptops, mobile phones, Ipods, game devices. As we know now, television is still
there with live broadcasts such as news reports and sports events that still attract mass audiences. But Television is also now a more and more participatory media, in which TV viewers can engage in the reception of their shows more widely and often. In fact, since the introduction of the use of the Internet in television broadcasts, TV viewers and particularly fans have developed new technological skills and new ways to consume their favourite TV shows. And reception is an endless circle in which fans discuss the latest episode of a show, ask questions to producers and casts, and elaborate theories with fellow members of the community.

Recently in France, Cultural studies theories and especially reception studies theories have entered academia in sociology and information and communication sciences. Two scholars, Eric Maigret and Eric Macé, have been promoting this field in order to analyze media texts and media reception in different ways. They published a book, Cultural Studies. Anthologie, focused on reception studies in which they translated important classic texts from Henry Jenkins, John Fiske or Janice Radway for example. The main problem with the non-legitimization until now of Cultural Studies in France was first the frontier of the language (the main texts are in English) and second the fact that academics still think in terms of high culture vs. low culture. To cope with this view, Maigret and Macé created the concept of “médiacultures”. In their collaborative book “Penser les Médiacultures : nouvelles pratiques et nouvelles approches de la representations du monde”, they frame the concept : “what is at stakes here is the conflicts of definitions in the public sphere, the changing in the cultural practices, and the place of aesthetics in contemporary lives”. Thanks to the introduction of Cultural Studies, new perspectives of researches open up in France especially regarding fan studies, reception and audience studies.

References


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