Philosophy on Television: Impossible Dream?

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Vladimir Jankelevitch: “When philosophy is suspect in society we should be anxious, because it shows that society has less interest in truth.”

French television has broadcast more than 3,500 programs featuring philosophers and their work between 1951 – the year when Jean-Paul Sartre first appeared on the television news – and the end of the twentieth century. Given the apparently antithetical nature of these two entities, one a popular visual technology reliant on the image, the other an abstract intellectual discipline founded on the word, the mere existence of these programs is remarkable. It challenges fundamental prejudices about the incompatibility of mass media and high culture, and belies the argument that television is necessarily anti-intellectual, a threat to democracy, cultural and moral values, and the inevitable arch-enemy of the book. And while this phenomenon could perhaps first be understood as a result of the French state taking the educational mission of public service programming to heart,


Vladimir Jankelevitch, “A quoi servent les philosophes?”, Apostrophes. François Chatel, director, and Bernard Pivot, producer and host. Antenne 2 (January 18, 1980), INA (1h 14 min 6 s)
it is astonishing to note that even after privatization (in 1984), such broadcasts not only survived, they actually thrived. Indeed, despite the inherent difficulty of the exercise, by regularly inviting philosophers to the small screen, for over half a century French television has forced a confrontation between philosophers, their ideas and the broader public. Leaving aside for the moment historical interpretations concerning why such a wealth of “philosophical television” exists in France, this modern marriage of seemingly incongruent mediums underscores a significant question: What is the nature of this presence? Put otherwise, is it really possible to do philosophy on television? Can complex ideas be transmitted on the small screen?

**Socrates Would Have Detested Television**

According to some, it is impossible. Television’s temporal and structural constraints are opposed to the communication of complex thought. On *Le Cercle de Minuit*’s December 6, 1994 broadcast “Spécial: Philosophie,” one guest fumed, “Socrates would have subscribed to the idea that television constitutes a grave menace to the city.” Why? Because, “the power of a spirit like Socrates requires time for expression.” Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu agreed. “Is it possible to think fast,” he asked in *On Television*, without thinking “in clichés?”  Hasty and superficial by definition, so the argument goes, television fosters urgency, craves “cultural fast food” and necessarily stifles thoughtful discussion. The conclusion is that television forces philosophers to reinvent themselves either as propagandists, who summarize

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their oeuvre in formulaic sound-bites and vulgarizing slogans, or as crass peddlers, hawking their books in order to increase sales. Such criticisms raise legitimate fears. They also hinge on three disciplinary assumptions: the first is that “doing philosophy” takes time; the second is that, since philosophy is fundamentally verbal and abstract, there is nothing to show; and the third is that philosophy should be, like intellectual production at large, divorced from material concerns. The first two of these stances see the relationship between television, time, and the image as completely structural. In this way, they oversimplify the effects of historical change. The latter stance betrays a naive view of the way that intellectual capital functions. Collectively, these positions presume that since early public television (from the fifties, sixties and seventies) privileged longer, uninterrupted broadcasts and largely eschewed advertizing, it must have supported the televising of philosophy more readily than the post-privatization, market-driven environment (of the eighties, nineties, and the twenty-first century). Let’s take up each of these objections in turn.

Too Little Time and Nothing to Show

Does the televising of philosophy require time? There is no doubt that the lengthy formats and deliberate pacing of early public programming were indeed amenable to the kind of sustained dialogue that supports philosophical exchange. And it is undeniable that the introduction of advertizing (in 1968), the emphasis on entertainment and the turn to flashy graphics and rapid-fire edits that followed privatization in the 1980s posed challenges for intellectual broadcasts. However, it suffices to plunge into the archives of France’s Institut National de l’audiovisuel (INA) to
complicate a thesis of cultural decline. Interestingly, numerous examples, from Michel Foucault’s fifteen minute discussion of *Les mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*) on *Lectures pour tous* (June 15, 1966) to Jean-François Lyotard’s equally brief interrogation of the role of the intellectual in the media on *Tribune Libre* (March 27, 1978), illustrate that even in the era of public television, substantive philosophical exchange did take place on the small screen in limited periods of time.

In *Tribune Libre*’s fifteen-minute sequence on Jean-François Lyotard, innovative camera-work proves integral to the program’s philosophical argument about the relationship between power, representation and truth. While rare, such examples illustrate how television’s visual dimension can serve philosophical exchange – even within the framework of a temporally limited broadcast.

Jean-Claude Cordy (producer. FR3, March 27, 1978) INA.

And even in a commercial landscape, where the short format reigns (as epitomized by the ironically titled four-minute philosophy clip *Pas si vite!* (Not So Fast!), which aired from 1995–99 on the cable network Canal Plus), a wealth of full-length broadcasts on philosophy (like the 1994 program noted above) continued to be produced. Thus, both the temporal requirements of philosophical television and the effects of historical change are often overestimated.

But does philosophy have a visual dimension? In interviews that I conducted, several philosophers responded to this query. “No!” philosopher Luc Ferry told me emphatically – despite his regular appearances on the small screen.

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3 Many of the broadcasts referred to here can be viewed at the website of the Institut national de l’audiovisuel (INA, the French national television archive), at [http://www.ina.fr](http://www.ina.fr).
Television does not allow the communication of concepts – only of convictions.

Luc Ferry, “Pourquoi la philosophie est-elle si populaire?” Bouillon de culture. Bernard Pivot, producer. France 2, (December 20, 1996) INA

Both Yves Jaigu, former president of France-Culture (1975–84) and Jean-Noël Jeanneney, former president of Radio France (1982–86) share this opinion and insist that, given philosophy’s reliance on the word, radio is a superior means of philosophical transmission. From this perspective, the visual serves merely to distract.

Renowned French philosopher Alain Badiou, however, argues that philosophy exists as both discourse and corporeal practice. For Badiou, philosophy is a profoundly embodied activity, and as such, visual. He informed me, “we can say what we like, but philosophy, singularly because it is not uniquely un savoir (a body of knowledge), needs a figure of transmission that is not simply a book and is not merely abstract speech... Socrates was corporeally present.” Pierre Dumayet, one of the premier journalists of early French TV (and the first to interview Michel Foucault on the small screen, in 1966) agrees. Dumayet also insists that while we may not be able to learn philosophy from television, it is nevertheless capable of demonstrating “philosophy in action.” As he told me, “What we can do is give demonstrations of this way of thinking... Foucault is an excellent example. We watch him speak for ten minutes, we understand, we easily see that he doesn’t speak like anyone else at all and that he has great form – like an athlete running.” He continued softly, his voice lost in memory, “Foucault’s conceptual form was superb.”
Nevertheless, Dumayet concluded, “We cannot learn to do philosophy in fifty-two minutes or even in twice that. What we can do is touch people, if you will, or something akin to that. We can get you interested in philosophy.”

Michel Foucault: “I ask myself, are we completely unable to recognize that thought might have something else entirely to do beyond just prescribing to men how they should act?

Television’s explicitly visual dimension rendered it a surprisingly useful technology both for demonstrating philosophy as process and for attracting new audiences to the discipline. It also promoted the production of powerful new forms of philosophical iconography. In 1961, for example, French audiences were enchanted by footage of the eminent philosopher of science, Gaston Bachelard, who – with his aged face, tufted white beard, broad forehead, mischievous eyes, and aura of wisdom (all suggestive of the classical Greek image of the philosopher) – visually symbolized the sages of old.

Jean-Claude Bringuier: “People who don’t do philosophy commonly think that philosophy doesn’t really serve any use.”

Gaston Bachelard: “Yes, well, in my opinion, it is useful to think with. Of course, if you don’t mind depriving yourself of any original thoughts, you can skip philosophy.”

The clip, which appeared on the celebrated news magazine, Cinq colonnes à la une, captured 83% of the viewing audience and became a television classic; by the end of the century it had been

- Michel Foucault, Lectures pour tous. Jean Bertho, director, Pierre Dumayet and Pierre Desgraupe, producers. Canal 1 (June 15, 1966), ORTF, INA (14 min 35 s)
- Gaston Bachelard, “Portrait d’un philosophe”, Cinq colonnes à la une. Hubert Knapp, director, Jean-Claude Bringuier, journalist. Canal 1 (December 1, 1961), ORTF, INA (9 min 35 s)
rebroadcast more than twenty times. Such successes indicate that due to the theatrical nature of the discipline, which is founded on the Socratic dialogue and rooted in an embodied oral practice, philosophy has clearly profited from its relationship with the small screen. But do philosophers sincerely envision TV simply as an opportunity to “incarnate” their work, or are they actually motivated by more prosaic desires?

**Social Sage or Market Whore?**

It is well known that in the intellectual milieu, money and marketing are taboo. Everyone feigns disinterest. And yet, as the influence of TV spread, its commercial impact multiplied exponentially. For philosophers, the results could be astonishing. Thus, during the weeks following Vladimir Jankelevitch’s January 18, 1980 television appearance on the literary show *Apostrophes*, the seventy-six year old French philosopher sold thirty thousand books – more than he had over the course of his entire career. Despite the evident marketing advantages, however, few philosophers have been prepared to admit that they assiduously court media exposure. After all, media mastery threatens the sacred myth of intellectual objectivity. The real sin, of course, lies not in attracting media coverage (no philosopher has received more TV airtime in France than Sartre who was discussed or appeared on the air more than 610 times between 1951 and 1999), but rather in appearing to orchestrate that coverage on one’s own behalf. Thus, media-savvy Bernard-Henri Lévy – known as BHL – finds his work lampooned as often as his poetic good looks, shock of black hair, and unbuttoned white shirts. Suddenly, debates about whether television can transmit philosophy spill over into arguments about disciplinary boundaries and the
dangers of promotional tools. Does the modern French philosopher (as Jean Baudrillard once maintained) occupy not the public space, but the publicity space?

François Aubral: “Bravo Bernard-Henri Lévy, you are a publicity genius, three times over!”

Bernard-Henri Lévy: “Well, if publicity is about getting my ideas to the maximum number of readers possible, I’m all for it!”

Control over the attribution and diffusion of intellectual power has shifted since the end of the nineteenth century from the universities to the publishing houses to the modern mass media – and in particular, to television. Television hosts (as the career of Apostrophes’s host Bernard Pivot made blisteringly apparent) have become important cultural mediators. They now exercise unprecedented influence over the intellectual field. It is hardly surprising that some philosophers view this development – which has dispossessed them of considerable authority and prestige – with some misgivings. Television not only hi-jacked traditional systems for assessing intellectual value, it also aggravated long-standing proscriptions against scholarly self-promotion while raising ominous predictions about the death of intellectual culture per se. In an article titled, “Le philosophe masqué” (published in Le Monde in April of 1980), Michel Foucault refers to the “deep-seated anxiety” and the “sense of impotence” that the mass media, “who direct the world of books and create or destroy reputations at will” provoke amongst the intellectual elite. Many philosophers – even those frequently seen on TV – invariably

● Bernard-Henri Lévy, «Les nouveaux philosophes sont-ils de droite ou de gauche?», Apostrophes. François Chatel, director, Bernard Pivot, producer and host. Antenne 2 (May 27, 1977), INA (1 h 16 min 10 s)
express reticence (if not outright hostility) vis-à-vis the medium. However, as Foucault continues, “I shall never be convinced that a book is bad because its author has been seen on television. But of course, it isn’t good for that reason alone either.”

Why France? Philosophical Television and French National Identity

Philosophy seeks a portal into the fundamental nature of human existence. By providing a framework for interrogating the nature of being-in-the-world, ethics, aesthetics, logic, and epistemology, it promises the kind of conceptual emancipation that goes hand in hand with political democracy. But as cultural signifier, as political tool, as celebrity iconography, and as demonstrative lure, in the second half of the twentieth century philosophy has also functioned as part of a conservative project that seeks to consolidate and protect a specific version of national identity – understood as white, Western and patriarchal – through the construction of a common cultural imaginary and an epistemological frame.

Since at least the eighteenth century, France has presented philosophers and philosophy as the apogee of its rich, culturally sophisticated patrimony. To this day, the discipline signifies a set of attributes – intelligence, sophistication, gravity, wisdom, depth, and tradition – that have been culturally coded to capture and convey a certain idea of what it means to be French. Television has promoted this status, while creating new forms of philosophical identity and new branches of philosophical production. It has also cultivated a broad public, one taught to associate knowledge of philosophy with national literacy. The discipline’s unique status in the French school system – France
is among the very few countries where philosophy at the lycée level is required, taught by specially trained professors and evaluated by national, compulsory exams – is inextricable from the ways in which French television has publicized philosophy as a national right, a cultural asset, and a moral guide. Is all that passes for philosophy on French TV good? Of course not. Has it gotten more difficult, especially in the era of privatization, to control the conditions that support quality productions? Definitely. But can we “do” philosophy on television? Even a cursory glance at the archival evidence demonstrates that the only accurate response is a positive one.

Whether we admire the results or not, the history of the televising of philosophy demands that we jettison presumptions about the fundamentally anti-intellectual nature of the visual field and raises critical questions about the role of education in democratic societies, the relationship between high and popular culture, the public function of intellectuals, and the very survival of national identities in a globalizing world. Finally, it encourages us to rethink philosophy itself – asserting that the content of the discipline is indivisible from the new media forms in which it finds expression.

Jean-Paul Sartre: “Fifty years ago, people and intellectuals were separate, but now that should no longer be the case. Not so that intellectuals can give counsel to the people, but to the contrary, so that the masses can take on a new form... and that is why I tell you that we shall surely see one another again.”

Jean-Paul Sartre, Sartre par lui-même, part 2. Alexandre Astruc, Michel Contat, directors (1972). First broadcast on TF1 (April 22, 1980), INA (1 h 37 min 30 s)
BIOGRAPHY

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