

Some might ask why we take interest in the evocation of former times when the EU is on the verge of a crisis that could lead to its dissolution. The reason is that representations of the past, such as they appear in the media, often reflect on-going anxieties, it would not be incongruous to say that, by regularly looking at television broadcasts and allusions to history on the Web, a perceptive observer would have foreseen the difficulties the Union has been facing for about three years. We began our inquiry in 2008-2010 and, resuming it after six years, we come across impressive changes that are not mere updating of old programmes but signal a deep uneasiness with regard to the past and the present days. There are now more historical channels and there are more programs on History, which quite often relate indirectly to present preoccupations. At the same time there is a tendency to enclose History inside the national frontiers.

History, on TV and on the Web, takes on three main forms:

- Self-representation. All of us have a history that encompasses not only our personal remembrances but also our family, friends, geographical and social surroundings. Life stories have become an autonomous genre, a vivid, not always reliable account of lost periods. TV channels have long resorted to witnesses whose contribution doesn't cost anything and whose memories are often interesting or entertaining. As for the social networks they offer everybody a chance to chronicle their deeds and those of their household. Be it on TV or the Web such accounts are less important for their subject matter than for the way they are exposed and the manner in which TVs use them.

- Fanciful or terrifying episodes of the past. Days of yore are a far away territory when everything was different. Candle lighting, horse riding, kings, gentlemen and highwaymen offer an immersion in a luxurious world or in a dangerous environment, a change of scenery

without leaving one's armchair, TV set designers are good at staging an ambiance with painted cardboard and fairy-tale dresses.

- An attempt at explaining events or evolutions that happened and at showing their influence. As the word makes it clear, "past" is over and won't return, history, in its more serious, documented version doesn't replay it, told from the standpoint of the historians and their addressees it tells more about the interpretation system and the preoccupations of the present than about the epoch taken in consideration.

There were, at the outset of the century, permanent exchanges between the European countries, the BBC sold its transmissions on the Ancient world to many foreign channels, programmes popular in one country were bought and adapted in another. Such deals are now negligible. There was a circulation of ideas and forms with changes that made them accessible to a foreign audience.

There is still a circulation but only of "ready made productions": a Company, usually an English or an American one, makes a series that emphasizing secrets, treason and love stories, can be sold everywhere. A good example is "The Medici – Masters of Florence", sold in various countries, not only in Italy, where countless historical mistakes provoked a mini-scandal, as can be seen in the comments of the Italian official Facebook page. But there is also a different look at the past, history understood in the third signification we have given to the word is now considered with distrust and becomes obliterated by the two other forms. It is such displacement that asks for a clarification.

According to an opinion expressed on the *Reuters' forum* a few days before the referendum (4 June 2016) the Brexit might offer an opportunity to liberate the Britons from their obsession with WWII. Take it the other way: is it not more likely that the Brexit was possible because a certain past was fading out? The project of a European community was born after

the conflict to make impossible another European bloodshed and create a third entity between the Big Two. The venture, partially achieved, is brought in question by the rapid evolution of the world, the European Union is unable to defend its members against the globalization of economy, the financial crisis and the migrations towards the old continent provoked by wars or merely by poverty.

The prospect of a confederate Europe has been growing faint for some time and this has been translated into a drop, on the small screen, of big historical synthesis leading up our days. From the 1980s to the beginning of the 21st century extensive series, prepared with historians and carefully illustrated by original film footage were put in the air in most European countries. Many dealt with the two World Wars, dictatorships, the *Shoah*, but there were also programmes about contemporary economic or cultural transformations such as was brilliantly evokes in *The People's Century* aired by the BBC in 1995. This vein, still exploited in 2010, is now on the decline, many express doubts about a possible objectivity of such comprehensive historical accounts.

Different illustrations of such evolution are offered by the Spanish and Dutch examples. After Franco's death, the Spaniards, bored by four decades of lies, were anxious to now more about the Civil War and the dictatorship. Private or public channels put in the air twelve broadcasts about the story of the 20th century that was also frequently evoked in talks or fiction films. The traditional political parties go on arguing about that period but the new groups, *Ciudadanos* and *Podemos* don't care about it. In conformity with their audience's state of mind the Spanish channels pass over the commemorations of events that, now, look far away.

In 2012-13 the Netherlands the public channel NPO 2 celebrated *De Gouden Eeuw*, the golden age of the 17th and 18th century, period of

prosperity and intellectual influence, when the East India Company secured, thanks to its trade with the far East, secured the Dutch a large income. Interestingly, television history doesn't question the reality of such affluence but its legitimacy, was it not based on iniquity - a query that challenges the sunny version of the Dutch past.

The 25 May 2016 a blogger noted on the British *i-News* website that the referendum campaign in the United Kingdom was “peppered with attempts by both sides to hitch history to their cause”, implying that history can easily be distorted according to the interests of whatever cause. In Eastern Europe reservations about the historical truth are openly expressed on television, a presenter, on *Slovenia 1* (21 June 2016) showed how two incompatible versions of the attribution of Istria to Slovenia could be defended with serious arguments on both sides of the frontier, another (17 August), stressed the fact that historical events were often told and interpreted in opposite directions, as was the case for the Hungarian minority in Slovenia which felt persecuted, while the majority had an opposite view. On *RTL Club*, main private channel in Hungary, the anchor-man, presenting a transmission typically titled *The Legends Live with us* noted how arduous it is to carry out a thorough historical investigation. *Super stacja*, Polish private channel aired, the 1st March 2018, a debate about soldiers who, after the war, went underground not to submit to the communist rule, some argued that it was a beautiful moment in the national history, others that it was only a beautiful legend and that history, far from being in black and white, was to some extent a collection of legends.

Topics that gripped audiences' attention around 2000, totalitarianism, Nazism, terrorism, are still present on West European small screens but by rerunning old broadcasts or by treating them on a

reduced, almost parodist manner, *Hitler's hidden medical files*, on BBC 2 (9 March). dealt with trifling aspects of the Fuhrer's life; an enticing heading, *World War II: secretes archives*, on the Italian private channel *Focus*, was merely a series about conjectural plots against American national security. Britain privileged local history, a study of programmes put in the air before the 23 June 2016 (date of the referendum) proves that the Brexit was announced by a withdrawal not merely on national but more significantly on small scale past events, the titles were self-explaining: *Hidden Villages*, *All Steam Trains*, *Visit of historic houses*, *Back in Time*, *British Country Life*, *The Secret History of my Family*. Old broadcasts such as *Blackadder*, burlesque version of British history, were recycled, transmissions digging out the far origins of British families like *Who do you think you are?* were more popular than ever. The Reuters' forum mentioned above stated that many Britons conceived of themselves "as an indomitable island people" who didn't want to abide by the rules of other nations. *Time and History*, on the Italian RAI 3 broadcast well prepared chronicles on minute events: failed uprising in 1857, victims of Camorra, battle against the Arabs in Poitiers in 732, liking of the Italians for sea side shores. In Spain prevailed historical feature films and nostalgic transmissions of old newsreels.

Eastern European channels did not escape the temptation of turning in on local history. "It is impossible to investigate things in a throughout manner not just because data sets are incomplete, but because life is short, stated the Hungarian channel *RTL Club*. Although, small fragments can be telling... Anecdotes are important, three small stories can describe a person, a certain historic era. ... Small stories [can be used] in order to represent history." Actually, *Mysterious 20th century*, on the Hungarian public channel *Duna TV*, deals with the reverse side, the unknown aspects of notable event and with forgotten people who plaid an unsuspected part

in these occurrences. The main Polish public channel, TVP1, put in the air (9 May) *Hitler's Hidden Drug Habit* the day he celebrated the end of WWII (but at 4 a.m. *Memory of the Camps*, montage of films taken in Dachau and Auschwitz in 1945). *Churchill's Secret* (a supposed series of strokes in 1950) was transmitted on TV Slovenia 1 (25 May), yet these were merely stopgaps in the schedule.

Unresolved historical problems take much more room on Eastern European televisions than on their Western counterparts. The question of origins, dodged in the West thanks to well-established national romances, still worries nations that lost their independence during the Modern Age and, after WWII, become satellites of the URSS. Documents often mentioned, presented and commented on TV, date the foundation of Polish history back to the Baptism, in 966, and that of Hungary slightly later, to the reign of Saint Stephen who died in 1038. But the East European countries, submitted to Austria, Germany or Russia, briefly self-governing between the war, freed in 1989, are a bit in a quandary about their present situation, the advantages taken from their adhesion to the European Union is partly marred by the feeling that Brussels encroaches upon their independence. Their mistrust surfaces in accusations against the past attitude of Western countries, the Allies, especially Britain, are indicted by the Polish TVP 1 (1st March) to have betrayed Poland in Yalta and handed it over to the Soviets, *Slovenia à la Greta Garbo* put in the air by *TV Slovenia 1* (21 June) maintains that in 1990 European leaders, keen on conserving the integrity of Yugoslavia, didn't support the independence of Slovenia.

Was it to little avail that partisans, in these countries, took an important part in the fight against Germany? Everywhere TV channels emphasize their deeds, protection of researched people, formation of resistance networks, bombings, battles with the occupiers are often

evoked. However the resistance has become an object of controversies. Starting for a meeting where, in Perennial Way, Slovenian resistant began to unify their different organisations *From Perennial way to Tivoli - 70th anniversary of the Liberation Front*, an animated debate on *TV Slovenia 1* (26 April) opposes those who solemnise the event to those who argue it was a communist manipulation which prepared the seizure of the country by the extreme-left. All contributors agreed to condemn atrocities perpetrated during the German occupation but another split occurred about responsibilities: what was the role of collaborating forces, to what extent did the Catholic Church support the repression against communists?

In Poland, the fate of men that, after 1945, didn't accept the communist rule and, under cover, fought against the power. They are now treated as heroes, a special holyday is dedicated to their memory. Were they only freedom fighters? Or, living in the margins of society, didn't they become mere out-law, surviving only thanks to theft, extortion of money, at times murder?

Western countries had gone through the same polemics in which contending political factions use history to support their views.

It is usually taken for granted that History told at a certain moment deals much more with this moment than with the period wich is its supposed object. In the specific case of broadcasted television, the periods and topics taken into account are relatively unimportant, what matters is an overall tendency common to different countries: the Tv channels trying to please a public whose opinions are extremely different, avoid general accounts of a period or a problem, but concentrate upon local issues or put in the air ready made productions. History as entertainment non as an introduction to the present difficulties of Europe.

