

E-STORY IO1 – Observatory

ANALYSIS OF SELECTED TV PROGRAMS – Hungary

It is quite significant that the number of non-fiction programmes dedicated to historical topics on Hungarian television has decreased drastically during the last several years (for example in comparison with the results presented as part of the "History on Television" research project led by Instituto Parri in 2010).

As of the Spring-Summer season of 2016 we have found only one educational documentary series on the public channels that is specialising in the research and representation of history, and there is also only one regular historical programme on the two major commercial channels of Hungary. Both of these programmes aired weekly and deal with the events of the 20th century.

Historical programme on the public channel:

Duna TV: A rejtélyes XX. század (Mysterious 20th Century)

The homepage of the programme where past episodes can be watched online:
<http://www.mediaklikk.hu/musor/arejtelyesxxszazad/>

What is the genre of the text?

This is an educational documentary series that contains 25-minute long episodes.

Content of programme

The creator, editor and leading figure of the series is a prestigious university professor of 20th century history, Prof. Miklós Kun. He is an expert of the 20th century history of the Soviet Union/Russia, and the programmes he creates, more or less, always concentrate on topics connected to Soviet history. The series concentrates on political history and stresses the fact that it is based on the decades long historical research that has been conducted by Prof. Kun in Russian historical archives, and on interviews he personally conducted with witnesses of the political events.

One of the speciality of this series is that it concentrates on the lesser known details of important historical events. Presents numerous historical documents, and especially concentrates on the wide variety of personalities who were behind these events. Often these persons were not the main players, but their personality, individual character, taste of style, and also emotions had dramatic effects on the main players and major events. In this sense the overall logic of the programme intends to demonstrate the task the historian faces when tries to decipher the meaning of historical events by piecing together snippets of information (documents, motivations, emotions, circumstances etc.).

The episodes broadcasted this summer concentrated on the history of the communist dictatorship in the Soviet Union and in Hungary during the 1950s, and the history of the 1956

revolution in relation to Soviet politics (the 60th anniversary of the revolution will be celebrated this October).

The following analysis/description is based on the episode aired on 24th of August, 2016 (each episode has a similar structure/format). This episode concentrated on the role played by the Soviet politician, Jurij Andropov in Hungarian politics during the 1950s.

What are the dominant formal aspects?

Narration: (1) is there a narrator/reporter? (2) is the narrator/reporter visible or only audible?

The narrator of the programme is Prof. Kun. He already is present personally in the main title of the programme: he walks towards us on the screen meanwhile the letters of the programme's title (as if a puzzle would be completed by the presence and movement of the historian) are put together from visual fragments of archive pictures and graphic elements.



Prof. Kun, as the expert narrator, from time to time appears on the screen as he is standing in a room (it might be a library but no books are visible). He wears an elegant, formal suit. Mainly he narrates the programme, summarises the events, introduces historical figures. When documents are quoted actors are used as "voice" of the document. In interviews – that (it is suggested) were conducted by Prof. Kun himself with Russian politicians who were witnesses of these political events – it is only the subject of the interview is visible as a "speaking head".

Rhetoric: (1) does the narrator/reporter merely report, or (2) openly explain/provide context for the historical event presented?

"Fictionalising" elements can be found at the beginning and end of the programme. All of the episodes that deal with the communist dictatorship starts with a famous Hungarian poem by Gyula Illyés titled "Egy mondat a zsarnokságról" [One Sentence about Tyranny]. The poem is presented by the voice of the poet himself accompanied by his portrait on the screen.

And this particular episode was closed by a Hungarian hit song from the 1950s titled "Ahogy lesz, úgy lesz" [Whatever will Happen, Will Happen].

The narrator-historian from time to time mentions that the material and information presented in the programme is the result of his historical research. "A big stack of unpublished documents were compiled at the time that could not be published because the political situation was tense. *But I have collected this documents again in Soviet archives during different periods of my career as a researcher.*" – sais Prof. Kun in this episode.

In another case, after he had summarised the role played by a certain Soviet politician stationed in Hungary in the 1950s and who – based on Prof. Kun's research – cooperated with the KGB during that time, Kun states: "*But when I was interviewing him in Moscow, he denied plain and smile that he worked for the KGB at the time.*"

About the problems of archival research that historians sometimes face he remarks: "It is said that those data (that was collected about the ideological education Hungarian politicians/public figures had to participate in the 1950s in the SU) has been destroyed by L.I. Brezhnev. *But I spoke to an archivist in Russia who saw this data collection 20 years ago. But this data is not available for researchers.*"

Sometimes the narrator-historian makes comments that seems to be his personal opinion based not on scientific research but on personal value judgements, emotional commitments.

The problematic connection between "objective facts" and the "human factor" in the work of the historian can be demonstrated by his statement: "It seems that Molotov was a milksop, at least this is what I heard about him, and in light of these events that can be true."

Visuals: any elements of the (1) image (shot scale, composition, angles, depth, camera movement, light and colours) and (2) editing (construction of space and time) that stand out?

The programme is especially oversaturated with visual effects. The screen almost always is full of pictures of documents, persons and archive footage – very often all visual elements are present at the same time, overlapping each other. Split screen and several type of "picture in the picture", "multiple frames in a picture" effects are used while the whole screen is embedded in more visual effects (textures, frames, animation). Banners and floating texts are also present. This visual overflow makes the contrast between the static picture of the expert-narrator and the other visual material even more striking.

One of the comments at the webpage of the programme criticizes the visual features of the series by saying that this "cheap visual firework" is not worthy of accompanying the serious work of the professor. (Most of the time these visual effects are really truly irritating and do not help to follow the narration.) Another comment on the forum page of the programme notes: "This program is produced for contemporary brainwashed viewers. Visual tricks are everything. Visual effect must be in the latest fashion, the historical message worth sh...t without them..."

Setting: (1) studio – is there an audience in the studio? (2) on location

As mentioned before, Prof. Kun as the narrator stands in a strange room that could be a library but no books are visible. It could be also a projected studio set. It seems to be an artificial non-space. He stands there alone and always shown within the same frame size with a fixed camera. The contrast between the pictures of the narrator and the visual features of the illustrative parts are very striking.

Footage: does it use (1) archival footage, (2) re-enactments, (3) inserts such as graphs, charts, maps

The programme quotes a huge amount of historical documents – professional actors read out the excerpts while the pictures of the original documents or related archival footage is shown on the screen.

This particular episode used a substantial amount of archive footage about the events of 1956. The programme also uses footage of interviews conducted by Prof. Kun during the 1990s with Russian politicians stationed in Hungary during the 1950s.

What is the immediate audiovisual context of the text?

How is the text part of the television flow: (1) what precedes and follows it? (2) is it thematically related to these texts? (3) Is it interrupted by commercials?

This programme is aired on a weekday in the late night time slot (at 11 p.m.). Before and after usually fictional films are broadcasted in the evening/late night slot. On public channels the programmes are not interrupted by commercials but before and after the programme commercials are broadcasted.

Historical programme on the commercial channels:

RTL Klub: XXI. század (21st Century)

The webpage of the programme where past episodes can be watched online:
<http://rtl.hu/rtlklub/21szazad>

What is the genre of the text?

It is a 25-minute long educational/entertainment programme broadcasted weekly. The subtitle of the programme is: "The Legends Live with Us".

Content of programme

The programme's *ars poetica* states: "It is impossible to investigate things in a throughout manner not just because data sets are incomplete, but because life is short. Although, small fragments can be telling... Anecdotes are important, three small stories can describe a person, a certain historic era. This programme uses these small stories in order to represent history since these legends live with us in the 21th century."

The topics of the programme almost always connected exclusively to the (cultural and political) history of the 20th/21st century. Most of the episodes deal with Hungarian or Hungary related questions. The history and culture of the socialist era is frequently represented. During the 2016 Spring-Summer season of the programme, for example, the following topics were treated: the story of the construction of the only atom reactor of Hungary; the construction of the Hungarian communist model city: Stalin City; the disco club culture during socialism; Hungarian illegal publications during socialism; political assassinations in Hungary after 1989. Non-Hungarian topics of the season were: an episode about the Beatles story; an episode about the cultural history of medical use of herbs; and an episode about the historic, psychological and sociological questions of finding the perfect mate.

The following analysis/description is based on the last episode of the 2016 Spring/Summer season that was broadcasted on the 7th of June before the Summer break of the programme.

The episode dealt with recent political history of Hungary and the ex-Yugoslavia. In 1991 the Hungarian government sold 36 thousand Kalashnikov automatic rifles to, the then Yugoslavian state, Croatia without the knowledge of the Yugoslavian government. This, practically illegal, arm deal was the main topic of the episode and in connection with this the Hungarian politics of the era of system change (1989) and the history of the Yugoslav Wars was also discussed.

The episode also summarized the history of the Yugoslav region after 1945, the creation of Yugoslavia, its member states and its ethnic composition by using voice over narration combined with explanatory graphics and maps.

What are the dominant formal aspects?

Narration: (1) is there a narrator/reporter? (2) is the narrator/reporter visible or only audible?

A constant rhetorical feature of this programme is the "subjective" reporter/narrator. The reporter who created the episode appears on the screen at the beginning and starts to narrate the story. Every time the reporter connects the content into his/her personal experiences – how does he remember those times when the events that follow were taking place, whether he/she knows anyone who were effected by those events, and so on. This opening usually creates a subjective/emotional motivation and stresses the relevance of the story to the present time. During the interviews with witnesses we usually see the reporter as asking questions and investigating "his/her" story.

In this episode the following types of interviewees were present: ex-soldier of the Croatian army who used the rifles in question; ex-high ranking Croatian politician; the Hungarian minister of foreign affairs of the time; a university professor (historian).

Rhetoric: (1) does the narrator/reporter merely report, or (2) openly explain/provide context for the historical event presented?

The programme's important rhetoric feature is the subjective narrator who appears on the screen and also serves as the invisible narrator throughout the programme.

This episode also used a fictional film in order to represent the historical era of the early 1990s. The first illustration of the time was Emir Kusturica's film *Underground* – short excerpts from the film were used as illustration for the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

The episode, after discussing the history of the Yugoslav Wars, closes with a (rather strange) rhetorical conclusion: since two ex-Yugoslav countries are already members of the EU, and the others are working on becoming members, it would have been better if they all could joined the EU in 1990, and that would have made the war unnecessary...

Visuals: any elements of the (1) image (shot scale, composition, angles, depth, camera movement, light and colours) and (2) editing (construction of space and time) that stand out?

There is no significant visual element that needs to be mentioned. The programme/episode follows visual conventions, for example shows the historian in his office surrounded by books and historical maps on the wall.

Setting: (1) studio – is there an audience in the studio? (2) on location

The programme always starts in a studio where the reporter introduces the story, then he/she sets off to follow the story. In this episode we visit the interviewees in their offices, and also visit the military museum where the representative of the museum (a soldier himself) demonstrates for the reporter how a Kalashnikov works, and shows how easy it is to use – that makes it a very popular weapon in different kinds of military conflicts around the world. We also see the reporter holding/trying out the gun.

The recollections of the time of the war is accompanied by pictures of the original locations, that was recorded by the reporter, that still have the traces of war (collapsed buildings, bullet holes in the walls of buildings etc.).

Footage: does it use (1) archival footage, (2) re-enactments, (3) inserts such as graphs, charts, maps

The episode uses archive footage of airplanes bombing something – it was a simple illustration, probably not shot during the Yugoslav wars, it seemed like as if it was from WWII.

Graphics and explanatory maps were used to illustrate the creation of Yugoslavia after WWII and its ethnic composition.

The episode also used archive footage from the time of the Croatian war as the illustration of the Kalashnikov story. Sometimes (especially when the quality of the footage is not very good) the pictures are labelled as "amateur footage".

What is the immediate audiovisual context of the text?

How is the text part of the television flow: (1) what precedes and follows it? (2) is it thematically related to these texts? (3) Is it interrupted by commercials?

This programme is aired on a weekday in the late night time slot (after 11 p.m.) and repeated on Sunday mornings (around noon). Before and after commercial advertisements are broadcasted. On weekdays the programme is preceded by the late night edition of the channel's news programme, and followed by a discussion program about contemporary public issues. On Sundays it is embedded into the flow of weekend magazine programmes.