

During our Logroño meeting in April 2017 we had a debate about the relationship between television and the Web. Most channels have created a Web site on which viewers can express their opinions regarding past programmes and ask for other, new transmissions. TV networks are more and more influenced by the reactions of their public, instead of the previous top\bottom, channel\audience relation there is now a permanent exchange bottom\top and vice-versa. We came to the conclusion that treating separately TV and Web doesn't allow to take into account this double flow. We have therefore decided to treat jointly TV broadcasts and reactions to these broadcasts on the Web.

It was also decided, in Logroño, to choose the first days of May 2017 for the second step of our common inquiry about the representation of history on television and in social networks because few periods concentrate that many anniversaries or important dates:

- 1st May, Labour Day,
- 1st May 2004, official adhesion of ten East European countries to the European Union that passed from fifteen to twenty-five members,
- 8 May 1945, capitulation of Germany,
- 9 May, Europe Day,

not to mention local anniversaries in most countries of the EU.

The first step of our investigation had taken place in the Spring 2016, the second was carried out in May 2017. In this brief span of time many changes occurred, an assessment of modifications and novelties shows that, despite the modest room scheduled for transmissions devoted to the past, references to gone by periods tell a lot not only about what happened but also about issues that bother an European Union in the making, wavering between strengthening or loosening the bonds that unite its members.

One point appears clearly in 2017: history is above all a political matter. If it was already implicit in 2016, the investigation preceded the vote in favour of a Brexit, separation of the United Kingdom from the EU, so that history was used in Britain to enhance the originality and uniqueness of British culture and society, in other countries to question the adherence to the Union in the light of each country's national individuality. In 2017 most commercial channels of the European Union have banned history programmes because they are likely to provoke controversies and antagonize part of their audience, those which still air broadcasts connected with the past do it on precise, generally partisan grounds. We shall see how RTL Klub, private Hungarian channel, challenged Budapest authorities. On the other hand, by broadcasting *The Durrells*, evocation of an English family whose intellectual influence was paramount in the middle of the 20th century, or transmitting adaptations of one of the most popular writers in the same period, Agatha Christie, ITV, conforming to the dominant line in the United Kingdom, played an active part in evidencing what sets Britain apart from continental societies. In the other cases we have analysed, television history is exclusively transmitted through public channels in rather different ways, according to political orientations that deserve a close scrutiny.

Let us remember that history was long, at least during the main part of the 20th century, one basis of national consciousness. Every European country had its great men, its victories and hardships, its golden age; school education, literature, official discourses perpetuated the feeling of belonging to an exceptional, secular inheritance that made this land different from any other. The rapid development of extra-European powers, bigger than the rather small European countries, the harrowing obligation to choose between a proud isolation, prelude to decline, and an identity loss in a federation have reduced to very little past glories and made history look out-dated. In their report on the

Slovenian TV channels Darko Štrajn, Sabina Autor, Tina Šešerko and Vanesa Brezinšek talk of what they nicely consider a “*media gesture of de-politicization* within contemporary society”. They mention, by way of example, the 32-kilometre march around Ljubljana, which initially recorded that from 1941 till 1945 the Germans had surrounded the city with barbed wires but is now disconnected from its historical origin and regarded as a mere sportive event. Another, more impressive case is the 1st of May, celebrated everywhere as Labour Day, without any allusion either to the hard fight necessary to obtain its instauration nor to its prohibition in many dictatorships. Some prefer to speak of *de-historicization* or of presentism – a tendency to care only about what is immediate, at hand or in sight, because the future is unpredictable and the past obsolete.

Only state institutions are in a position to keep alive a fragile memory of times gone by that will soon become blurred if it is not permanently revived. Members of the European Union are not always able or prone to do it. In this respect Hungary and Poland have adopted radically opposed ways of making do with their past by banishing it from the small screens in the first instance, exalting it in the second. Not surprisingly the political character of any history account reveals itself in the choice of both countries. RTL Klub, Hungarian subsidiary of the Luxembourg company RTL, free from official pressure, dared make allusion to Hungary’s accession to the European Union, the 1st May 2004, an anniversary that the government preferred to pass over in silence; the channel claimed also the opening of Popular Republic’s archives, a threat for those in power who had collaborated with communist authorities. There were topics that Hungarian public channels could hardly leave aside such as the great figures of past centuries or the 1956 uprising against the communist rule. Although not dangerous for the authoritarian line adopted by the power, the programmes

dealing with such themes were broadcast almost furtively, during the night. The reasons for such eclipse of former times are manifold; on the one hand history has always been used for indirect political attacks against the power and the Web puts such practice within everyone's reach. On the other hand, a government that wants to make Hungarian citizens proud of their country would take trouble over celebrating the centuries spent under Vienna's sovereignty, the defeat in both World Wars, the loss of nationals and territories, forty-two years of Soviet domination.

Polish television is not in a quandary about the reminder of times gone by, as is stated in one programme, "Było, nie minęło", *Past is still alive*. Poland was invaded and annexed by more powerful neighbours, crossed out of maps, occupied and persecuted by the Nazis during the second World War, it fell also under Moscow's control but the Poles, being able to boast that they resisted and saved their language, their traditions, their religion, take pleasure in evoking their national history. No less than nineteen hours of small screen were dedicated to retrospective transmissions the 1st of May, twenty-one the 2^d and so on, nowhere was the past so densely represented. WW2 is obviously mentioned, notably thanks to an Encyclopaedia in episodes that users can podcast, but this topic is quantitatively less important than other periods, especially the struggle for independence in the 19th century with a long, proud analysis of the 1791 constitution, the 1st European document of that sort, established notwithstanding the foreign occupation, and biographies of freedom fighters. Yet the most striking aspect of Polish television history is its open-mindedness. Lots of broadcasts question the reliability of memory and traditions transmitted from generation to generation, ponder over the notion of historical truth, specialists debate about the limits of knowledge and the difficulty of viewing a past situation in the way contemporaries saw it. There are also

programmes against the tide, a regular transmission dealing with regional practices and folklore treats of the Lwów region, formerly Polish, given up to Ukraine after WWII; against the persistent anti-Semitism of many citizens Polish television recorded, in “Tora i miecz”, *Torah and sword*, the revolt of the Warsaw ghetto, mentioned those who had helped the Jews to hide, visited the museum dedicated to Polish Jews.

Focused on a glorious past, Polish television history is not widely open on the outer world. Europe is the big absent, there is not even an allusion to the country’s adhesion to the EU, only Germany is the subject of numerous broadcasts, which denounce the Nazi dictatorship and the war crimes perpetrated by the Wehrmacht. Exterior relationships limit to the USA with which, thanks to émigrés and movie stars, Poland firm bonds of friendship.

Poland is not an exception, despite the 2004 widening of the Union and the Europe Day it could be said that the EU is totally absent from its member’s small screen, were it not for *In Europe*, a Dutch series that explores the 20th century Europe thanks to interviews and visits to places important for the evolution of the European nations. This was an exception; Europe Day was not even mentioned in Dutch tv news. Among the thirty most popular transmissions broadcast by BBC1 and BBC2 none was dedicated to Europe. There was an allusion to Europe Day on TV Slovenia 1, without any information about the evolution or the present crisis of the Union. The Spanish channel Cuatro inserted in its programme « Cuarto Milenio », *Fourth Millennium*, short notations regarding foreign countries, notably the liberation of Mauthausen. That was all in a week where many dates fell in with at least a brief rappel.

We began our investigation ten years ago. In the following decade little has changed, television channels of the European Union still give greater place to national history. Is it, as suggested by Erin Bell, Florian Gleisner and Julio

Montero, because the producers lazily submit to the supposed inclination of spectators? Or because national audiences are only interested in the history of their homeland, not in that of other countries? At any rate, the time allowed to past periods is limited, it amounts to about 7% of the total broadcasting in the United Kingdom and 5% on the six most important Spanish channels. Percentage, Julio Montero notes, is meaningless: spectators privilege a few nation-wide channel and certain transmissions dedicated to famous actors, thrilling crimes and exceptional events attract millions of viewers while valuable broadcasts aired by secondary networks are unsuccessful. As for the main kinds of history programmes they were, in June 2017, what they had been in 2007, documentaries, fictions and backward-looking.

Documentaries are meant to provide reliable, all-encompassing data on a given topic and enable the audience to formulate an independent, well-founded opinion about the problem. Oddly enough, far from arousing balanced judgements, they often provoke harsh, violent polemics on the Net. The rout of the Italian army at Caporetto in October 1917, episode of the Italian RAI series *The Great War, a hundred years afterwards* triggered off an exchange of abuses. A succession of programs dealing with Dutch colonization: *Slavery*, « Goede Hoop », *Good Hope*, « Michiel de Ruyter », *The Admiral* and indirectly « De Gouden Eeuw », *The Golden Age*, brought about identical reactions. Fierce debates followed the broadcast of « Preverjeno », *Verified*, weekly transmission of the Slovenian channel POP TV, which the 1st of May compared the life standards in the Yugoslavian and contemporary periods.

Caporetto is usually briefly mentioned in Italian historiography, emphasis is rather put on the Vittorio Veneto victory, prelude to the breaking down of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the series quoted above it is one of the more developed events and accent is placed upon the 400,000 civilians who running

away from the Austrian army were badly succoured by an inefficient administration and a reluctant population. A harsh and over-simplified debate opposed those who could be labelled “patriot” to those who would be “humanist”. According to the former after the defeat every effort was necessary to prepare a revenge that would soon be spectacularly taken. The latter answered that helping the refugees was the duty of civilians who could not do anything for the counter-attack but who, being much too selfish, closed their door to their co-citizens.

The Dutch Golden Age of the 17th and 18th centuries was a period of economic prosperity thanks in particular to the activity of the Dutch East Indian Company which was deeply involved in the slave trade. Critics about the dark side of colonisation had begun in Britain, then migrated to France and the Netherlands.

Here again polemics flourished on the web. For the “humanist” it was unfair to celebrate flourishing epochs whose prosperity was based on an overexploitation of human beings. For their adversaries that meant a lack of understanding of history, intelligent viewers should take into account the mentality of past epochs, much different from ours.

Was life better or worse under Tito than in an independent Slovenia? Communism guaranteed a secure job and a quiet future, citizens had confidence in the state. However there was no liberty, the police kept an eye on everybody and controlled even private, family activities.

Such quarrels, made possible by the combination of television and the Net, tell a lot about the social use of bygone times. History is a tale taught a school, repeated with the same episodes and the same thematic in popular books, magazines, plays and films, a nice romance which focuses on a nation, gallant, generous in prosperous periods, resilient in front of adversity. Most citizens,

accustomed to such narrative, like to have it told on the small screen but feel uneasy when it is modified. When they saw *The Battle of Stalingrad*, in the series « Il tempo e la storia », *Time and History*, Italian viewers felt delighted, it was exactly what they expected, whereas in the same series, *1917, the Crisis of Germania*, which treated 1917 exclusively from the domestic point of view of Germany confused them. The programs on slave trade in Holland or Caporetto went much further, they cast doubt on the absolute fairness of the Netherlands and Italy, part of both audiences reacted aggressively because their certainties shattered, history is too strong an element of national consciousness for its challenge not to cause distress.

Defining historical **fiction** is not easy, dates (“This occurred in 17..”), allusions to famous personalities or well-known events is not sufficient, what is necessary is an accurate recreation of an epoch-making scenery and the representation of events that took place or could have taken place in the period. The negative aspects of fiction, where history is concerned, are a centring upon one or two main characters as well as the emphasis laid on superficial psychology and sentimental relationships. Many criticisms were levelled at « Bolnica Franja », *Hospital Franja* aired by *TV Slovenia 1* the 1st of May and at « Zwartboek », *Black Book*, broadcast the 4 May, Remembrance Day in the Netherlands. Both refer to WW2, the former deals with a hidden hospital for wounded partisans that operated during the German occupation but gets lost in useless anecdotes, the latter, while showing, in the background, the persecution of the Dutch Jews, lingers on the adventures of its heroine gets out of ant tight spot.

However try and fictionalise the past can be diverting and telling provided it tends to convey lively the lifestyle, modes and passions of an epoch. The Spanish TVE1 initiated in 2001 « Cuéntame cómo pasó », *Tell me how it was*

going on, a weekly retrospective chronicle of a lower middle-class Madrid family followed in its daily goings-on since the 1960s. It lingers now on the 1980s. Beneath trite incidents, domestic conflicts, worries about money, celebrations and parties, the serial calls to mind the particular atmosphere of a country only just freed from dictatorship, initiating into democracy and preparing its admittance to the EU. If the family problems and pleasures are imagined the viewers delight in remembering what they experienced three decades before, the programme, put in air in prime time, attract often 20% of the share.

« Cuéntame ... » is now followed, in late prime time, by « Ochéntame », whose enigmatic heading, a play on words, can be read as: *[Tell] me the Eighties* or *[Introduce] me [to] the Eighties*. It is a documentary that, having recourse to photographs, film and television extracts, testimonies, supplies documentation on the week of the 1980s mentioned in the serial. Because of the schedule the audience is reduced but about one third of those who watched the fiction continue with the documentary. TVE1 has cleverly adapted to the formula of **backward-looking** adopted by all tv channels. Such recipe is usually said to come up to audiences' nostalgic mood and this is certainly true. There is also, on the part of the networks, a strategic calculation, the younger generations turn away from the small screen in favour of electronic games or interactive activities on line. Bringing people in their thirties or forties back to their childhood can be a way of taking them over. In the generally recognized meaning of the word, nostalgia is a desire to go back to a previous period of one's past and to restore to life a supposed perfect happiness, opposed to an unpleasant present. Such sentimental retrospect is effectively orientated towards foregone times, but it is not necessarily mournful, Such sentimental retrospect is effectively orientated towards foregone times, but it is not necessarily mournful,

recent research¹ opposes it to sorrow, or melancholy and emphasizes its positive aspect: engaging in nostalgic reflection on the past allows to think in terms of time and to perceive retrospectively one's life as full of meaning and purpose. Whatever their motivations, viewers enjoy retrospective broadcastings: on the polish channel TVP Historia « Był taki dzień », *It was such a day...*, in which people tell how they perceived an important moment, has already more than one hundred and sixty episodes; on TV Slovenia 1 a regular transmission is titled *Witnesses*, « *Pričevalci* », one person recounts freely, with photographs, their memories of the war and the communist period; several programmes of the Italian RAI invite the public to send amateur films and comment them. The accounts are sometimes dramatic but narrators seem always delighted to remember and report an episode of their life and, as can be checked up on social networks, the audience, reacting positively, gives examples of similar occurrences. The combination television/Web is the best chance of stabilizing the public of the small screen and keep up history a share of the transmissions. History research, leaving aside great figures and important events has tended in recent decades, to focus on life stories of individuals. It endeavours at understanding how people managed to face their daily problems and make sense of the difficulties they met daily. Viewers who send photographs or amateur pictures, old letters, diaries of their grandfathers participate actively in the constitution of a collective archive that, thanks to the small screen is accessible to a vast audience and makes history look more alive.

The reduction in the schedule conceded to history goes together with the vogue of private life itineraries spread to the entire world – or at least to a large audience. In a time when the future of the EU, at the parting of the way between break-up and strengthening, is unclear it is not surprising to a withdrawal into the particular. History, since it is only history of every country, with no

reference to the other members of the Union, cannot offer recipes. State institutions try to keep it alive, as one of the foundations of a fragile national unity but it is useless for private organisations, like commercial TV networks. History will come back to the small screens when the fate of the EU is sealed

ⁱ Routledge, C., Arndt, J., Wildschut, T., Sedikides, C., Hart, C.M., Juhl, J., Vingerhoets, A.J., & Schlotz, W., « The past makes the present meaningful: nostalgia as an existential resource », *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, n° 101, 2011, pp. 638-652.