

# The Nation on Screen



**The Nation on Screen:  
Discourses of the National on Global Television**

Edited by

**Enric Castelló, Alexander Dhoest  
and Hugh O'Donnell**

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE NATION ON SCREEN

ENRIC CASTELLÓ, ALEXANDER DHOEST  
AND HUGH O'DONNELL

It is fair to say that thinking on national identities changed dramatically in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While nations are still often presented as old, stable entities, it has become increasingly clear that they are in fact relatively recent historical constructions. As such, they are the result of a deliberate process of nation-formation, with representation as a key mechanism in the production of images and stories about the nation (Hall 1992: 291-293). While their impact is real and tangible, nations are “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991) which are discursively constructed through emphases on shared roots, history, ethnic characteristics, culture, language and (often) religion. Nations are not naturally homogeneous, but are unified through discursive processes of nation-building. Along with this theoretical deconstruction of essentialist notions of nationhood, questioning their proclaimed unity and stability, the late 20<sup>th</sup> century also witnessed the increased breaching of national borders in global society. Processes of postmodern fragmentation and global cultural flows have questioned the self-evidence of the national (Barker 1999).

Moving on from nation to identity, representations (for instance in the media) are considered as material for the formation of cultural and national identities (Kellner 1995; Mato 2003). In postmodern times, identities are conceived as plural, fluid and hybrid constructions (Alcoff 2003). Does this mean there is no longer room for the former, homogeneous national identities? Many authors take a middle position: national identities haven’t disappeared altogether or become obsolete, but they have changed. The national is reconfirmed in global contexts, leading to hybrid and “creolised” forms of “glocal” culture. In all of this, however, it is important to keep the impact of globalisation in perspective: many

people—in fact most people—never leave their country, so nation and locality are still relevant today, and the flexibility of identities should not be exaggerated (Golding 2005: 540-541). Also, the national is still often reconfirmed on an everyday basis, in a common sense way of perceiving the world as divided into nations, a phenomenon which Billig (1995) names “banal nationalism”.

In this view, the media have been and still are agents of the national. And perhaps this is because the media are powerful “storytelling machines” through which the narration of the national is spread and reaches us in our homes. As Bhabha (1990) stated, we can then study the nation as a narration. This narration should be understood not only from the meanings of these stories, but also taking into consideration its political structure of production and its consumption. As regards television, (monopolistic) public broadcasting in Europe was deliberately conceived as a national medium, and despite increased competition from commercial channels television continues to unite large (imagined) communities of viewers (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998: 114; Schulz 2000: 133). Even within the context of multiple identities, there remains a strong sense of national identity which television keeps on addressing (Straubhaar 2005). For Hartley (2004: 8), mass broadcasting to national audiences remains a dominant mode of television—although clearly not the only one. Waisbord (2004: 386-387) offers a particularly balanced account of the national in contemporary media, claiming it does remain important in a globalised context. Contemporary media normalise the national on an everyday basis, making national cultural forms available and offering opportunities for shared media experiences. Morley (2004) likewise stresses that the media (including television) are still to an important degree national, particularly in creating a sense of normality in everyday life, but that notions of a unified nation are obsolete. With Creeber (2004), we can add that this may not be such a bad thing, as former notions of nationhood were problematic in their negligence of cultural diversity.

Turning to present day programmes, the question remains where “the national” is to be situated. Currently, this question is most often asked in relation to formatted genres, in particular reality TV. Most reality programmes are based on strict international formats, leaving little room for changes. Does this mean audiences all over the world basically watch the same programme and therefore are culturally homogenised? On one level, this is undeniably a prime example of global television, along with the omnipresent American TV fiction. But taking a closer look, most authors seem to agree that underlying the standardisation there is a

“national” or “local” level, reflecting local audience preferences and contexts (Moran 1998; Waisbord 2004: 381). Several studies show that, besides the use of the national language and local participants/contestants, many elements “indigenise” formats by either deliberately “flagging” the nation or (more often) invisibly referring to it in a form of “banal nationalism” (Aslama & Pantti 2007; Dhoest 2005; Turner 2005; Van den Bulck & Sinardet 2005). Moreover, Milly Buonanno (2008: 88) has noted how the audience “adopts and adapts” the meanings and forms of television shows in what she names a “paradigm of indigenization”, which would work as the process “through which forms and expressions of external cultures, elaborated by other societies, are appropriated, re-elaborated, and restored by diverse local societies.” These processes are producing constant re-readings and understandings of national discourses, appropriating external stories to the national and, at the same time, reinforcing the boundaries between what is considered “the national story” and “the other nations’ story”.

Contemporary fiction is also deemed to refer to national elements, thus participating in the continuous construction of national identities. Hugh O’Donnell’s (1999) book on European soap operas offered an overview of how each country had been cultivating domestic television fiction, strongly rooted in national representations, stories and narratives about everyday life, but at the same time sharing elements of international formats. Castelló (2007) shares the constructivist view on national identity sketched above, with television (fiction) as an agent spreading representations of “the nation”. He analyses Catalan fiction focusing on notions of territory, language, cultural proximity (shared history and cultural values) and social issues. He has also argued how the narrated nation becomes a kind of “political stage” in TV fiction, reconfiguring scenarios, territorial representations, depictions of the population, or linguistic uses of characters (Castelló, 2009). Discussing remakes of an Australian soap, Moran (2000) considers accents, locations and cultural associations, while Hokka (2006) situates the local elements of a Finnish comedy in the representation of Finnishness (including stereotypes) and everyday life. Dhoest (2007) argues that Flemish TV fiction doesn’t straightforwardly “reflect” the national, but that it builds upon existing discourses and representations of the nation, in turn contributing to them.

The idea for this book came from the conference *Narrating the Nation: Television Narratives and National Identities* held at the Rovira i Virgili University (Catalonia, Spain). The collection of articles presents an overview of diverse television narratives on national identity, the approaches taken by different television formats and texts and, of course,

national contexts. The book is divided into three parts: the first dedicated to television fiction, the second dealing with television news and current affairs programmes or documentary, and the third offering an insight on entertainment, sports and big events. The aim is to give different analyses of television programmes displaying discourses on “the nation” in a range of countries including Australia, Canada, Germany, Israel, Italy, Spain, the UK and the former Yugoslavia. Of course, the reader will find that “local” contexts determine the connotations (whether these are judged positively or negatively) of these national representations which are related on some occasions to stateless nation realities, on others to the televised representation of incomers or to the use of sports (the football World Cup), musical shows and events (Eurovision) or even to the image of specific animals (like the beaver in Canada) in order to appeal to the nation.

Milly Buonanno presents an interesting study of the importance of religion and history in the storylines of the most successful Italian television dramas. Particularly striking is the interest of the Italian audience in the life of popes and religious historical figures which have been used as a basis for awakening and reinterpreting memories of the Italian past. For the author, it is exactly this kind of “appeal” to the components of national identity which was an indispensable condition for popularity, recognising the changes in collective identities over time. Paul Julian Smith offers an analysis of two of the main Spanish TV dramas, *Al filo de la ley* and *Hospital Central* and points out how urban representations, the relationships between the characters and other elements of the plots determine the specificity of these television products, which are very different from those produced in the US and in Latin America. These are two broad analyses of two well-established states and cultures, but does a stateless-nation context have any implications for national representations and audience understandings of television fiction? This question is answered by Enric Castelló and Hugh O'Donnell presenting some of the results of research carried out in Catalonia and Scotland on four of the most important domestic soap operas. The authors use the concept of “banal nationalism” (Billig 1995) to examine how certain national representations like the dichotomy between urban and rural or the language used lead to controversies among viewers living in different areas of those countries. This paper connects very well with the work of André Loiselle, who immerses us in Quebec's identity and the rural depiction in *Grande Ourse*, a horror TV show based in a tiny francophone village which provides one of the clearest examples of the paradigm of indigenisation articulated by Buonanno (2008). One of the main arguments of this work is noting that in television and cinema horror productions the

nation is “divided between urban cosmopolitan modernity and rural nationalist traditionalism”.

But, do soap operas and television fiction really feed our national identities? This is the question which Alexander Dhoest deals with in his article about the audience’s understanding of Flemishness in domestically produced and consumed television fiction. Avoiding a simple answer, Dhoest puts a wide range of elements on the table, which are commented on by the viewers and which the analyst of television and identity discourses should not underestimate: the ambiguity of the meaning of the national, the differences among genres and generations or the implications of the quality and style of the productions. The vision of Lothar Mikos is a somewhat different one. He argues that under conditions of reflexive modernity (the contemporary period) national identity is for the most part much less important to individuals than the development and maintenance of a stock of personal identities which can be drawn on as resources to solve the more pressing (professional and emotional) problems of everyday life. The success of international genres and formats, then, is largely due to the fact that they by-pass the level of the national altogether, addressing the viewers on a more personal, or at most local level.

As Hugh O’Donnell (2008: 45) has pointed out, relationships between news producers and governments are complex, but although in democratic systems media corporations have a high level of autonomy they are usually linked to hegemonic powers: mostly political parties, politicians and institutions. We can read the news as the story of these hegemonic groups and then also as their conception of nationhood. Sabina Mihelj analyses how these stories rise up in periods of rapid socio-political change like the case of Yugoslavia during the Balkan Wars. Identity conflicts can be strengthened and used as an “ideological arm” in these kinds of violent contexts in which journalists have a special responsibility. This case analysis illustrates clearly how national identities can be re-told, erased and re-built in short periods of time. This also sometimes implies removing old boundaries but mostly it implies a significant effort to remap them. The issue of immigration in Western countries is perhaps the most fruitful topic through which to study how national identity is reinforced through stories about incomers. We have three interesting examples of this issue in the chapters by Bernard Gross on British television, the work of Hilde Van den Bulck and Deborah Broos on Flanders, and Anna Roosvall’s analysis of Swedish memorial programmes. Gross analyses differences in “illegal immigration” and the boundary formations between “us” (the nationals) and “them” (the immigrants) in three illustrative case studies of clips of *News at Ten* (BBC 1). Looking into the language and

expressions used by the journalists to depict “immigration”, Gross shows evident contradictions in how Western journalists deal with such a complex issue. On the other hand, Broos and Van den Bulck have studied how a group of Muslim women decode the documentary series *Moslima*’s in comparison to Flemish viewers. This is a very well documented analysis which demonstrates the difference in decodings, a clear link with the active audience paradigm, and also the construction of stigmatised discourses on identity, which links with Goffman’s (1963) theories on “spoiled identity” in other ostracised social groups.

But television is also a great tool for what is known as “re-enacting” the past (but which might more accurately be termed “refictionalising” the past) and, at the same time, for displaying re-arranged narratives about history, produced and consumed according to contemporary parameters. Anna Roosvall presents an interesting example of how a television programme (the Swedish *Documents from Abroad*) categorises the world through historical representations of other countries. In the storytelling of the history of other nations, “a world of disasters, problems and lies”, there is also, implicitly, a built-in story about the home nation, comfortable and well-organised. Erin Bell and Catriona Elder’s papers examine how this occurs in the British and Australian cases. Bell takes the example of the re-creation of the Great War in *The Trench*, a series in which personal, regional and national identities were narrated through the remembering of a traumatic experience. Bell’s work is also interesting for the evaluation of how stories play with authenticity, sentiments, personal dramas, and how all these stories are taken up and developed further on the internet. In all these stories we of course witness the exclusion of “alternative” testimonies and points of view. This is the case with indigenous people in Australia, historically excluded from the national “grand narrative”. Catriona Elder analyses the differences between “indigenous” and “non-indigenous” perspectives in the TV show *Outback House*, which re-enacts (refictionalises) how the country was colonised. In this study, the interesting mix of genres used to engage viewers in new stories about the nation is extremely valuable. Here, television form mobilises different genres like the soap opera, the documentary and reality television which give rise to emotions, narrative tensions and credibility.

Perhaps the most popular and successful stories about nations are those displayed in sports and large-scale events like the Football World Cup or Eurovision. Gavin B. Sullivan studies how television cultivated a “national narrative” of “pride and party patriotism” in Germany during the 2006 World Cup. Football and international competitions provided an excellent opportunity to rescue certain kinds of national narrative in a country where

“discourses of the national” have been extremely controversial. The “celebration” of big sport events acts as a modulator of the messages on Germanness: “Televised reports of mass flag displays and forms of non-serious ‘party patriotism’ also helped to challenge previous norms and discourses that inevitably linked such displays with ‘unhealthy’ patriotism”. Something similar happened in the Spanish case during the European Football Championship (2008), also in a country in which national flagging has been traditionally linked with far right-wing, racist and fascist ideology. Francisca López offers her reading of Spanish national discourses through the song contest *Operación Triunfo* and the strategy of entering its winner into the 2002 Eurovision Song Contest. As happened during the European Football Championship, López argues how the display of national discourses is, at the same time, a great marketing strategy. The use of music is also present in the work of Dan Arav and David Gurevitz concerning the discourses articulated on television shows featuring Israeli army bands. The authors critique the ways in which these discourses establish trauma and militarism as a “normal” source of television entertainment and how these discourses are ironically appropriated into kitsch stories.

The Spanish case and the use of light entertainment is further elaborated by Mar Binimelis, Josetxo Cerdán and Miguel Fernández Labayen, who show how Francoism used the television shows produced by Los Vieneses to create an image of “openness” of the Spanish nation for the international community. This chapter contests the belief that all discourses on TVE (Spanish public television) during Francoism gave a one-dimensional story of national identity. The authors claim that the work of Los Vieneses, by offering a different, if not completely alternative image—because of the censorship—was at least far removed from the rigidity and strictness of the official national discourse of the regime. Finally, we have an interesting contribution concerning the links between the national and the commercial. Advertisements are perhaps the shortest but also among the strongest platforms for national narratives. Kim Sawchuk and Barbara Crow explore how companies appropriate the icon of the beaver to give a Canadian taste to their activities.

As can be seen, all these broad types of approaches tell us about the complex and rich forms in which “the nation” is represented through television. Far from becoming an obsolete discourse, the national remains a powerful logic for organising the global, and in these representations we find hegemonic and alternative discourses in a dialectic contest taking place daily on our domestic screens.

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## **PART I**

# **TELEVISION FICTION NARRATIVES**



# RELIGION AND HISTORY IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN TELEVISION DRAMA

MILLY BUONANNO

## **A Decade of Successes**

Over this last decade, television fiction has turned into the “central story-telling system” (Newcomb 1988: 88) of Italian society. In a country where reading books and newspapers is a thinly diffused habit, and where the national cinema ceased since the seventies to be a medium of popular entertainment, television has managed to play the role of contemporary supernarrator. The production of domestic drama, which in the eighties and the early nineties had dramatically decreased under the impact of foreign imports, has significantly increased in a relatively short span (Buonanno 2007). As a result, an intensive supply of homegrown fiction stories has spread out across the schedules of the six national terrestrial channels and, taking advantage of its privileged placements in those prime time slots—from 9.00 to 11.00 p.m.—when the greatest numbers of viewers gather before their screens, has attracted the largest possible audiences.

In fact the last decade has witnessed not only the development and consolidation of the Italian television drama industry, but also an uninterrupted series of strong ratings and popular successes. Worth emphasising in this connection is that the heights of popularity have been first and foremost achieved by the unprecedented wave of stories which, at the turn of the millennium, drew their inspiration and narrative matter from the source of the Catholic sentiment and collective memory of the Italian population.

In Italy, within intellectual, academic and journalistic circles, there is a common tendency to regard successes, and in general phenomena of widespread popularity, with a degree of snobbery. Given the presumed contradiction between quantity and quality, the mass audiences are considered as an indicator, as unassailable as it is deplorable, of the trivialisation of contents and programmes, aimed at indulging the middle-brow tastes of a mass of undemanding viewers.

On the contrary, successes should be taken seriously rather than being dismissed. They should be regarded as the most intense and paradigmatic expression of the eminently “choric” nature (Newcomb 1983: 31) of television drama in the context of broadcast television. In the metaphor of the chorus as a voice of the community or *vox populi*, tuned into a conventional and socially acceptable view of things, the television drama that we are accustomed to call “mainstream” can be distinctly recognised. Mainstream drama is the core of any system of popular narration, and certainly the major component of contemporary Italian production and consumption of domestic fiction, the primary producer of the highest viewing figures and phenomena of genuine popularity.

It is furthermore worth recalling that the past decade has been characterised by the hegemony of “cultural proximity” (Straubhaar 1991)—the audience’s marked inclination to prefer by far home-grown contents—as a guiding light of television consumption. This intensified need for cultural proximity is an effect of, and at the same time a counterpoint to, the processes of globalisation that are widely identified as threatening to strip local and national communities of their own native identities. The need for cultural proximity, the *need for home*, has fuelled a demand, more pressing than in the past, for “Italian story-telling”, and has brought into being an extensive pool of viewers of television drama, ready to flock to the siren call of the domestic supply. It is this wider horizon of expectations and needs for national story-telling that has provided the fertile soil of the decade’s astonishing series of big hits.

Against the background of these introductory remarks, I will now focus on the two genres that have displayed the greatest power of appeal and fascination among a wide range of loyal viewers: the genres of religious and of historical drama (not infrequently interwoven).

## **The Catholic Imagination**

Popes (*Papa Giovanni, Karol Wojtyła, Giovanni Paolo II, Il Papa buono, Papa Luciani*), saints (the adolescent virgin Maria Goretti, the elderly nun Mother Teresa), Franciscan friars (*Un posto tranquillo*/A safe place): the religious drama, almost always in the form of a biographical tale, has proved without any doubt to be highly appealing to and well-liked by Italian audiences in recent television seasons. In fact these life stories of popes and saints are very often double-sided, or better they are generic hybrids where the portrait of the religious personality stands against the background, or is placed in the midst of the historical events and circumstances that characterised his/her times. Fascism, Nazism, the Second

World War and the Holocaust, for instance, have more than a marginal space in the (double) biographies of Pope John XXIII and John Paul II. Religion and history converge in the same stories, which probably enhances the potential of these dramas for success.

In this connection, it cannot go unnoticed that the overall list of the twenty most watched works of fiction (see Table 1) is composed of two-part miniseries—except for one TV movie and one series. We are dealing here with a peculiar feature of the Italian television industry and culture: regarded as the most dignified format, given its similarity to the theatrical movie, the two-part miniseries is by tradition in Italy the privileged vehicle of any high-end serious drama. It happens to be by far the preferred format of broadcasters, creative talents and viewers. Even though many mini-series are failures, the large majority of successes adopt this format. Religious and historical drama is no exception.

It must be said that the high levels of popularity reached by the religious dramas in the early television seasons of the 21<sup>st</sup> century do not constitute an uncommon, weird or totally unexpected phenomenon. Stories drawing in one way or another on the plentiful reservoir of the Catholic tradition have always appealed to a broad national audience. In a market of cultural goods such as television, characterised by structural uncertainty regarding audience results, religious drama in Italy has provided over the years something of a reliable prediction of popular success. Hardly, if ever, has a religious tale—be it the Bible collection (from *Abraham* to *Jesus* to the *Revelation of St John the Divine*) broadcast since the early nineties, the lives of saints (the two biographies of *Padre Pio*, *St Francis*, *St Anthony of Padua*, *Rita of Cascia*), the stories of appearances by the Virgin Mary (*Lourdes*, *Fatima*), and much more—disappointed the broadcasters' expectations of a fair return in terms of viewing figures.

Actually we are not facing a new, but surely a highly intensified phenomenon which has gained momentum from the inception of the third millennium, coinciding with the Jubilee Year of the Roman Catholic Church (the year 2000).

Such an escalation of religious drama on the twin sides of both supply and consumption outlines an Italian scene that, in this particular respect, can be considered unique in the world. Foreign observers are often surprised by this, their surprise perhaps reflecting the sympathetic and culturally relativist attitude of someone who is noticing some strange instance of folklore. On the other hand, it is not unusual to perceive even on the part of Italian observers and critics an attitude of barely-concealed condescension towards a slate of programmes that are supposed to appeal

to the more traditional and less secularised components of the national community.

There is no doubt that the secularisation process in present-day Italy is less advanced and more unevenly distributed than in other countries. But the peculiar nature of the television phenomenon under analysis cannot simply be ascribed to cultural backwardness.

In fact, Italy is distinguished from other Catholic countries in the field of religion by the persistence of a strong and majority-held sense of belonging to the Catholic faith, seen and perceived by most Italians as a fundamental part of their collective identity, as well as of their national history. This widespread feeling is relatively independent of the practice of religious ritual, observed these days only by a minority (if a substantial one) of the population; it is even independent of the observance of the sexual and family morals preached by the Church. If anything, it is precisely the diverse manner of interpreting and showing forth religious sentiments—a recurring trait of Italian Catholics, and not a new one—and the high level of tolerance on the part of the Church in the face of such diversification that creates and maintains the conditions for lasting adherence to the Catholic faith. This adherence persists not in opposition to or in spite of, but within and through, the processes of secularisation and modernisation.

The strength of Italian Catholicism in present-day society owes much to “the affective approach to truth” (Garelli 2003: 818). We are dealing with a strategy aimed at recovering and maintaining ecclesiastical authority, hinging not so much on doctrinaire and prescriptive admonitions as on the communicative effectiveness of a religious message: a message that proves its truth in the context of charitable deeds and in a commitment to the most important matters of civil coexistence, that offers constant reference points on the profound meaning of life. All this takes place in a land that is enriched more than any other by historical religious memories, whose visible traces are scattered throughout the land, in numberless places of worship, art galleries, in towns and villages and in literature. A “Catholic imagination” comes to life from this, populated by saints, statues, churches, cathedrals, stained glass windows, paintings and nativity scenes; this allows symbols, icons and religious points of reference to be deeply rooted in Italians’ collective imaginary, and is in all probability related to their lasting Catholic sentiment, even if they are in large measure unaware of it.

Table 1: The 20 top TV dramas from 2001 to 2007

Title	Season	Channel	Format	Genre	Aud.*
<i>Papa Giovanni</i>	2001-02	Raiuno	Miniseries	Relig./hist	13,180
<i>Karol Wojtyła</i>	2004-05	Raiuno	Miniseries	Relig/hist	12,832
<i>Perlasca</i>	2001-02	Raiuno	Miniseries	Historical	12,205
<i>Giovanni Paolo II</i>	2005-06	Raiuno	Miniseries	Religious	11,329
<i>Paolo Borsellino</i>	2004-05	Canale 5	Miniseries	Biographic.	10,834
<i>Madre Teresa</i>	2003-04	Raiuno	Miniseries	Religious	10,600
<i>Un posto tranquillo</i>	2002-03	Raiuno	Miniseries	Religious	10,054
<i>Il Papa buono</i>	2002-03	Canale 5	Miniseries	Relig/hist	9,982
<i>Maria Goretti</i>	2002-03	Raiuno	Tvmovie	Relig/hist	9,896
<i>Il Maresciallo Rocca</i>	2003-04	Raiuno	Miniseries	Police drama	9,862
<i>Papa Luciani. Il sorriso di Dio</i>	2006-07	Raiuno	Miniseries	Religious	9,598
<i>Il commissario Montalbano</i>	2002-03	Raiuno	Series	Police drama	9,428
<i>L'uomo che sognava con le aquile</i>	2005-06	Raiuno	Miniseries	Drama	9,252
<i>Soraya</i>	2003-04	Raiuno	Miniseries	Biographic.	9,234
<i>Maria José</i>	2001-02	Raiuno	Miniseries	Historical	9,160
<i>Al di là delle frontiere</i>	2003-04	Raiuno	Miniseries	Historical	8,961
<i>Cime tempestose</i>	2004-05	Raiuno	Miniseries	Period drama	8,942
<i>L'uomo sbagliato</i>	2004-05	Raiuno	Miniseries	Legal drama	8,855
<i>Il cuore nel pozzo</i>	2004-05	Raiuno	Miniseries	Historical	8,831
<i>Gino Bartali – l'intramontabile</i>	2005-06	Raiuno	Miniseries	Historical	8,657

\* In millions

Source: Observatory of Television Fiction.

This is almost enough to help us to understand better the phenomenon, neither eccentrically folklorist nor attributable to the resilience of tradition, of the success of religious television drama in Italy. However, in order to

fully account for its intensification since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we should perhaps mention the structure of feelings of insecurity and risk that permeates the start of the new millennium, and affects to a lesser or greater extent the individual and collective awareness of the human condition and its destiny. Even though we may not sense all this in the ordinary and largely unreflective course of our daily life, we are enveloped if not infused with an atmosphere of anxiety and danger, and face uncertainty, both material and symbolic, in the future.

Springing from all this is a demand, albeit rather unarticulated, for points of reference, firm anchorages, and ethical orientations—as it were, sources of meaning. These prove more convincing if they are embodied by charismatic figures whose authority and exemplariness is acknowledged by popular sentiment. We should not therefore be surprised if television drama, in precisely these circumstances, has more recourse than ever to — and the viewing public follows *en masse*—the rich store of meaning, and the heritage of redemptive and charismatic personalities of a Catholicism in which, as said above, large numbers of Italians continue to recognise a fundamental element of their individual and collective identity. Nourished by Catholic imagination, religious drama in turn gives these people the contemporary televisual version of the “sacred representations”.

## **The Re-enactment of the Past**

More than thirty years ago, in a book that is now regarded as the founding text on television studies, Horace Newcomb (1974) identified the three basic components of televisual aesthetics as intimacy, continuity and history. Now as then, the nexus between television and history arouses surprise and scepticism. Concerning television we have, or think that we have, our own convictions; one of these relates without doubt to the nature of the “medium of the present”, totally in tune with the here and now, without any memory of the past.

It cannot be denied with any evidence that the greater part of television contents and genres, from news broadcasts to entertainment to television drama itself, is primarily oriented towards the narration of the present (sometimes live and in real time): it is the stuff of our daily experience and, furthermore, provides one of the main reasons for the medium’s appeal. But evidence is not infrequently blinding, in the proper sense of obscuring one’s vision; and in this case it obscures the fact that of all televisual genres, drama is the one that is most suited, equipped and also accustomed to working with the sense of history. Newcomb takes the view that television drama can be historical in different and unsuspected ways:

for example, through the long duration and the evolving temporality of the serials, which unfold over a period of years and not only build up their own story but also capture and memorise social history, while the viewers' lives run their course in parallel. Television drama can also be historical because of the evolution of the genres which is testified by the coexistence, in television schedules, of old and new programmes that constantly compare the past and the present. Or, more specifically, when it takes its inspiration from people who really existed, or from events that really happened, performing in such a way (and in its own way) the role of "television as historian" (Edgerton 2001: 1). More generally, television drama is historical when it recounts stories, true or imaginary, that are set in periods of the recent or distant past.

Italian television drama was intensely and primarily historical—in this last meaning—in the first twenty years (from the fifties to the seventies) of the public television monopoly, with protracted but decreasing instances of drift in subsequent years. The productions of that time preferred to revisit the past through the mediation of national and European works of literature, or through biographies of great Italians or the reconstruction of events of the Risorgimento (the building of the nation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century). This was the era of the *sceneggiato*, the Italian word for literary adaptation. The second half of the 1970s saw a process of "presentification" of domestic television drama, which reached its peak in the course of the nineties.

But television and televisual genres often function in cycles, closings and resumptions, runs and re-runs. We are, during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, witnessing a return to the past in Italian drama production. While the new vogue for reality and quiz shows has a grip on the present, television drama goes back to working on the sense of history and on memory (Buonanno 2007).

The temporal turn of television drama from the present to the past is a fact that has spread beyond Italy. To a different degree, and never such as to undermine the dominance of the present in the discursive regime of television genres, in all the larger European countries drama production has been affected in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by a process of "de-presentification", if not of true historicisation. From the reconstruction of daily life during the Franco era in the Spanish comedy of manners *Cuéntame cómo pasó*, to the reinvigoration of historical and biographical *feuilletons* on the French channels, to the increased production of English period drama and the unprecedented exploration of mythological (the Nibelungen) and political themes (the attempted assassination of Hitler) by German television: all over Europe televisual story-telling has taken to

cultivating what, according to Paul Ricoeur (2004: 16), could be defined as “re-enactement of the past” in contemporary narration.

We are facing here an occurrence that, at least in part, is the expression of a more general structure of collective feelings: contemporary observers and analysts (philosophers, sociologists and historians) have drawn attention to the perceptible presence and numerous traces of this sentiment. The philosopher Emmanuel Kattan focuses in a particular way on the revival of the past with reference to more or less distant traumatic events—the so-called “memory of trauma” or “wounded memory”: for example, he speaks of the “predominant place [occupied] in public space by concern with the past, in its different manifestations” (Kattan 2002: 29). “In this end of millennium Europeans [...] are obsessed with a new cult—the cult of memory”, Tzvetan Todorov writes (2001: 60), thus noting the risk of “compulsive worrying about the past” (2001: 61).

As we emerge from a 20<sup>th</sup> century that, through two world wars, totalitarian regimes, massacres and genocide, has stored up an accumulation of wounds in the archives of the collective memory—to draw again on Ricoeur (2004)—our entry into the third millennium, marked almost immediately by a deadly attack on a living symbol of Western modernity, has in all probability constituted a fertile breeding-ground for “subtle anxiety on account of the end of an era” (Cavicchia Scalamonti 2001: 9) and for alarm at the threat to security and identity (or what is so perceived). Such sentiments can generate grave uncertainty about the present and how it will turn out in future; they can trigger a drive, even a compulsion, towards rediscovery and acknowledgement of the past in an attempt to find reassurance, or inspiration, or simply something to take one’s mind off the pressing worries of the here and now.

Be that as it may, European television drama has taken to working on the re-enactement of the past, breaking up (without subverting it) the almost exclusive symbiosis with the present that could have been found only a few years earlier.

## **The Memory of Trauma**

Nowhere can one find more compelling evidence of this temporal turn than in Italian television. In other European countries the re-enactement of the past in all its forms, to be classified under the inclusive heading of “historical drama”, is concentrated in a limited number of works, thus indicating a symptomatic but not extensive cultural trend. In Italy, on the contrary, we are dealing with a widespread generic stream that, since its first appearance at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has amounted to

nearly a hundred works: all of them broadcast in prime time, many of them successful enough to make up half of the ten most watched dramas in each television season, over the quinquennium 2001-2006.

Beyond the climate of anxiety due to the passing of an era, which even in other countries—although to a lesser extent than in Italy—has inclined television story-tellings towards times past, it is possible to identify an alliance, or at any rate a concurrence, of other conditions that have probably favoured the emergence of such a marked and persistent tendency. First of all, what Edgerton calls the “big business” (2001: 2) of story-telling on television should be taken into account. Historical television drama, in its various subgenres, has given ample proof of its popularity, and in an industry whose guidelines are (to some extent inevitably) mapped out by previous experiences of failures and successes, these latter not merely “prolong”—generating continuations and repeats of the stories—but also “multiply”—promoting the production of other stories of the same type, laden with expectations of an analogous capacity to succeed.

Furthermore, even though not all historical material is equally usable—the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, is understandably the most often visited and revisited—the past, historical and literary, sacred and secular, still constitutes an immense reserve of material from which a wealth of narrative inspiration can be drawn. Historical events, heroic and exemplary lives, literary tradition and much else offer a further two-fold advantage. They put at authors’ disposal narrative material that is dense in dramaturgical potential, and allows the creation of works that benefit from the promotional value linked to the notoriety and the popularity of the original subjects (saints, popes, novels, events and historical personalities). Or at any rate they benefit from the curiosity aroused by the recurrence of names, of stories that re-echo and resound in the common memory, even if only by hearsay. The past, in short, possesses the prized added value of “a built-in promotional resource”; and, perhaps less prized but still capable of attracting audiences, the value of the visual pleasure of costumes, furnishings and manners of times past: the “small pleasures” (Caughie 2000: 211) offered by the decorative details of an era.

In addition, the return to the past can be referred to the “logic of the distinction”—in Bourdieu’s (2007) terms—between television genres in competition with each other. It is well known how the end of the nineties has seen a wave of intense and widespread popularity of so-called reality television, which is still continuing despite fluctuations. From *Big Brother* to *I’m a Celebrity—Get me Out of Here*, the new generation of reality shows are characterised by an extreme emphasis on the dimension of the

present: this is expressed and testified by the access that they open up to voyeuristic scrutiny of “life broadcast live” on television, and to the permanent monitoring of what happens in the “laboratories” in the “houses”, the “farms”, the “islands”. Although viewers see only sections and selected fragments of this incessant monitoring, the conception and enjoyment of the reality shows are inseparably linked to the idea of live filming of the daily life of our contemporaries. While these entertainment formats intensify the grip on the immediate present, Italian television drama goes back to working on history and memory and causes personalities, events and stories of the past to resurface: it is a logic of distinction that inspires television drama to distance itself from a genre that, in recent years, has represented a threat to its primacy in programming strategies and public preferences.

The abundant flow, still streaming, of stories of the distant and not so distant past, which as we have seen account for a specificity of contemporary Italian television, thus finds the conditions for its existence in a whole series of plausible, additional reasons. They join and reinforce what remains the most significant source of inspiration and fuelling of the historical trend: the cult of memory, even more the memory of trauma.

The historical dramas on plentiful offer nowadays on Italian television channels may go back in time to the romantic 19<sup>th</sup> century (*Wuthering Heights*), to a fantasised 18<sup>th</sup> century (*Elisa from Rivombrosa*), to the 17<sup>th</sup> century of Manzoni’s *The Betrothed* (*Virginia, the Nun of Monza*), to the ancient times of the Roman empire (*Augustus, Nero*); or else they can shorten the distance from the present day, setting the scene in the fifties or the sixties which witnessed the suffering migrations of so many Italians inside and outside the country, and the “economic miracle” turning a peasant society into an affluent, industrialized nation (*The great Torino, Marcinelle, Tell me*).

In most cases, however—and those cases significantly coincide with major successes, public resonance and popularity phenomena—the historical dramas focus on the years and crucial events of the Fascist regime, World War II, and its immediate aftermath. To recall just a few among the most watched: the hugely successful and acclaimed *Perlasca* tells the story of a fascist merchant turned saviour of thousands of Jews from Nazi deportation. *Maria José* is the biography of the last queen of Italy, well known as an opponent of Fascism and supporter if not militant of the anti-Nazi *Resistenza*. Based on a true story, the narrative of *Beyond Frontiers* revolves around the passionate and transgressive love-story between an anti-fascist Italian woman and a decent German officer, who ends by sharing with her the ideals of justice and freedom. *The Heart in*