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‘REMEMBERING OUR FIRST TV SET’

PERSONAL MEMORIES AS A SOURCE FOR TELEVISION AUDIENCE HISTORY

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Abstract: Personal memories represent a crucial source in outlining a history of television audiences. However, they are undoubtedly special historical tools, and their interpretation requires particular cares and concerns. Relying on interviews with direct witnesses, the paper describes the advent of television in the private space of the home in the mid-fifties in Italy, comparing personal memories with the interpretative repertoires filtered down by the popular media system. The paper also tries to contribute to a wider ‘European historical mosaic’ by seeking to relate some aspects peculiar to the Italian scenario to a broader transnational pattern.

Keywords: Italian Television, domestication, audience history, TV set, RAI, quiz show

1 Television Memories In The Historian’s Toolbox

In many of the most significant studies about the advent of television in the private space of the home and the medium’s subsequent domestication during its formative years, early TV viewers’ personal memories have proved to be a crucial source in outlining the historical course of the integration of the TV set into the domestic space.

After the seminal work by Shaun Moores on the arrival of radio in British homes,¹ other studies have shed light on media domestication² as both a historical process and a phenomenon of everyday life, relying on the collection of individual remembrances to theorise a broader and general pattern of incorporation and illuminating a collective memory on the medium, both as a material object and a ‘cultural form’³. This collective memory has generally been described as culture- and nation-specific.

1 Shaun Moores, ‘The Box on the Dresser: Memories of Early Radio and Everyday Life’, *Media, Culture & Society*, 10(1), p. 23-40

2 Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life*, Routledge, 1994

3 Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Collins, 1974

However, in collecting and comparing the various studies (many of them developed in European countries) on the topic of 'historical domestication', some transnational issues and common experiences arise, along with variations and specificities bound up with each country's particular social and cultural background. The common issues can easily be related to the ideal model of *hopes and fears* that always accompanies a new medium's road to affirmation in the social arena.⁴

For instance, the presence of television in the private space of the home was often perceived in different national contexts as a 'miracle' of technology. However, studies based on both personal memories and secondary sources have shown how, in different European countries, television's presence in the home has been either enthusiastically welcomed as an instrument capable of connecting the private space with the public sphere,⁵ or grudgingly accepted as an unnecessary luxury and a distraction from domestic chores.⁶

On the contrary, people often remember their first experiences of the small screen as a risky business, mainly because of deep cultural bias over the new medium. It was frequently considered 'dangerous and dodgy' for the stability and moral integrity of the family and domestic life, offering trivial content and intruding on their privacy, a theme that emerges in many sources from the popular media, both visual and print. Valid examples of this discursive repertoire are an Italian illustration from 1954, collected in the library of RAI Teche,⁷ and the plot of the British movie *Meet Mr. Lucifer* (1953), where a TV set given as a retirement present is sold on to different households, causing desolation and pain to its succession of owners



Fig. 1 The cartoon represents the TV set as a 'dangerous eye' intruding on the privacy of the home, and suggests protecting women from its gaze.

4 Vincent Mosco, *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace*, MIT Press, 2004

5 Tim O'Sullivan, 'Researching the Viewing Culture. Television and the Home 1946-1960', in Helen Wheatley, eds., *Re-viewing Television History. Critical Issues in Television Historiography*, I.B. Tauris, 2007, p. 159-169

6 Lisbeth Van Zoonen and Jan Wieten, 'It Wasn't Exactly a Miracle. The Arrival of Television in Dutch Family Life', *Media Culture & Society*, 16 (4), 1994, p. 641-659

7 The illustration has been published in the volume 3 *gennaio 1954. Cinquant'anni di TV*, Biblioteca Rai - Teche, 2004, p. 57

In presenting the results of a secondary field study on the social uses of television in Italy between 1954 and 1960, I will explore the issues connected to the methodological uses and roles of memory, in order to outline a social and cultural history of the early consumption of television in Italy. I will try to add a further piece to a wider historical mosaic, in seeking to relate some aspects peculiar to the Italian scenario to a broader transnational pattern.⁸

My argument is that a proper history of television audiences – and a proper history of television *tout court* – cannot be outlined without reference to 'life-stories' and media remembering as tools of historical reconstruction,⁹ cutting across the disciplinary fields of oral history and media ethnography to useful effect. However, when the object of analysis is set in the past, and its exploration has to come to terms with remembering and therefore subjectivity, special attention is needed. Indeed, remembering is a very special tool. Consequently, its consideration as a source for historical research must be handled with great care, taking into account and interpreting phenomena such as fake memories, memory leaps and, of course, the subjective self-representation of the witnesses. For all these reasons, a close insight into the interpretative patterns and critical readings of the medium, filtering down from the public debate on television hosted by other popular media (such as cinema and the press), can be used as a suitable way of contextualising individual memories. Nevertheless, personal memories can always confirm or challenge the discursive repertoires about television crystallised in the intertextual system represented by other popular media. They can also complement the latter's 'top-down' point of view with a 'bottom-up' perspective that casts light on the real practices through which the medium was incorporated into the private sphere of the home. Furthermore, it reveals the different 'cultures of television viewing' developed by audiences over the years when the medium was institutionalised.

2 'Intimate Histories' Of The Medium

My research has developed through a qualitative methodology based on a corpus of twenty in-depth interviews, all taken in Milan during a period of six months in 2010. All this field research has been accompanied by an overview of the interpretative repertoires on the domestication of television in the first decade of the medium's life in society, as they emerge in the popular and highbrow press of the time (broadsheet newspapers, tabloids, women's magazines, specialist magazines, RAI internal publications and advertising).

All the interviewees selected were frequent visitors of five main Senior Community Centres, located in different neighbourhoods, in both the city centre and the suburbs, in order to cover different social and cultural backgrounds.

The first criterion used to select the panel of potential interviewees was, obviously, age: all of them were born before 1940, so that in 1954 – when regular programming began and TV sets started to be sold in Italy – they would at least have been in their teens. Secondly, the group contained equal numbers of men and women, and it was balanced (albeit less precisely) between 'early and late adopters' (themselves or their families) of the TV set in the fifties and early sixties.¹⁰

All the interviews followed a semi-structured discussion guide, developed to investigate different issues concerning the domestication of the medium, such as the ideal and economic reasons for purchasing the TV set, how it was incorporated into the domestic space, different family members' roles before and after the arrival of TV in the home, the meanings that different family members attributed to the new medium, and the viewing habits that developed around it. During the interviews, all these issues explored the personal life story of each interviewee and helped to understand the social and cultural backgrounds in which their viewpoints were rooted.

One of the most interesting aspects of conducting the interviews in Milan was that it made it possible to collect

8 Jonathan Bignell, Andreas Fickers, eds, *A European Television History*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2008

9 Jerome Bourdon, 'Media Remembering: the Contributions of Life-Story Methodology to Memory/Media Research', in Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers, Eyal Zandberg, eds, *On Media Memory. Collective Memory in a New Media Age*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 62-73

10 Everett Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovation*, Free Press, 1962

memories and research data relating to many different Italian districts and regions. In fact, for at least two decades after the Second World War, in the period known in Italian historiography as the 'economic boom', Milan attracted massive migration from other, less developed, areas of the country. The immigration came not only from the South, where youth unemployment was high, but also from some other areas of northern Italy (the North-East and North-West). For this reason, many of the people who contributed to this research had first encountered the new medium before moving to Milan. Therefore, they were able to provide memories of their first experiences of the TV set in the home in geographic and cultural contexts very different from a metropolitan *milieu*.

Their memories shed a light on how the process of 'domesticating' television in Italy was not at all a one-sided experience but rather a process shaped in different ways depending on a multi-layered set of factors. For example, at the beginning of the medium's life in society, and at least for a few more years, television was mainly an urban phenomenon, both because of the slow development of transmission infrastructures and the high level of poverty in rural areas. Therefore, the collection of the interviewees' personal stories and experiences has revealed very different ways of 'imagining' television and distinct ways of conferring meanings on the new medium and its presence in the domestic space. For instance, people who experienced the arrival of television in rural villages tended to emphasise a perception of 'magic' and 'miracle' when referring to their first contact with the new medium, and they are more likely to have experienced forms of collective viewing in the private domestic space of the few families that owned a set in those early years.

When I first arrived in Milan, I used to live in the city centre. And even there, in the beginning, very few people owned a TV set. Even if, I have to admit, there were more TV sets in the centre than in the suburbs, and more in Milan than in the South of Italy. I remember that, in Bari (Puglia), before I came to Milan, no one owned a receiver except a lottery winner who spent the entire prize on a TV set and hosted these TV nights for all the neighbours at his place (M 1).

When television first arrived in my house, it was a kind of magic! It was like a party (...). I remember that I used to polish my first TV set with great care... as if it were a magical object, a big deal! The first times, I even thought about using gloves in order to touch it without spoiling it' (W 1).

In contrast, the urban citizens tended to stress to a greater extent the ideal link between modernity and having a television in their private homes.¹¹

Of course, gender was a crucial issue in addressing the process of domestication of television as well: female interviewees tended to remember their first contact with the TV set as a matter of incorporating it in the home very carefully, principally as a piece of furniture, or even as a phenomenon that gave rise to new social protocols and rituals that they had to deal with and properly perform.¹²

Conversely, male interviewees' memories of the advent of TV in the private space of their home had more to do with issues of familiarising themselves with a fairly complicated technology and with consuming the first TV programmes and content.

The TV set was so big: it occupied half the lounge. It was huge and very deep; I still remember the brand: it was a Philips. I put it in a corner of the lounge, on a mobile dolly, a piece of furniture with a space to hold drinks. And we used to cover the TV set with a lace cloth or a little ornament (W 2).

When people came over to watch TV, I used to make coffee for everyone. There were more than twenty of them; I even had to buy some more cups and spoons. And then I had to tidy up after them (W 3).

11 John Foot, 'Television and the City: the Impact of Television in Milan, 1954-1960', *Contemporary European History*, 9(3), 1999, p. 379-394

12 Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV. Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, The University of Chicago Press, 1992

What I remember about our first TV set was how I had to sort out the electrics, then we watched the Thursday night quiz show, *Lascia o raddoppia?* (M 2).

It is interesting to note how some promotional campaigns launched by RAI in this early stage were based on this interpretative repertoire as well: in 1960, the public broadcaster distributed a pamphlet, *Invito alla televisione*, explaining how to arrange the receiver set in the domestic space.¹³ A whole section of the pamphlet was dedicated to guidelines on the proper handling of the new technological device, and its advice to women was that: 'The TV set must be handled with the special care reserved for fragile objects. In particular, the inner parts must only be cleaned by specialist technicians, and not by the inexperienced hands of the good housekeeper. Better a little dust than the risk of damaging expensive technology.'

From a scientific point of view, stimulating the memory of these early witnesses of the formative stage of the medium was by no means a straightforward process: understandably, they tended very often to take long detours from the discussion guidelines interweaving what they remembered with seemingly less relevant details of their personal history. However, even these frequent deviations were useful to frame and interpret the process of domestication of the medium, because they made it possible to get in closer touch with the interviewees' original environment and to identify the ways in which different life experiences shaped different ways of approaching television.

When dealing with media history through remembering and oral storytelling by direct witnesses, subjectivity can be a major methodological issue: while recalling their life experience, storytellers tend to represent themselves in a specific way, peculiar to their personality, through which their experiences as TV consumers are filtered. They are telling a story, in some sense. This attitude emerged clearly in the way some interviewees proudly described themselves as 'early adopters' of the new technology, by stressing their wealthy background or their ability to follow the most recent social trends in order to portray their household as a little 'miracle of modernity'.

Moreover, sometimes their memory was fickle in its attempts to piece together events in the specific history of the medium, for instance by erroneously matching some crucial programmes of this early television phase to the wrong year of transmission, or misplacing the date when important television events of the time were scheduled. Of course, these memory lapses were easy to check and did not represent a problem for the purpose and the effectiveness of the research. On the contrary, they were useful in acting as alerts, often motivated by the ideal connection between the experience of consuming television and particular events in the witnesses' private lives.

Overall, what people remembered was never dispassionate and 'unbiased': a shared sense of deep affection for the origins of television emerged from the memories of these early witnesses. For the TV set's arrival in the private space of their households very often coincided with a cherished period of their personal life story, such as the start of a new family, a move to a modern and more comfortable house, a new job and a pay rise that granted access to all the brand new commodities of the fifties (a washing machine, refrigerator, dish washer, and, of course, TV set).

The first stage of Italian TV history surfaces in the collective memory as a sort of golden age of the medium, in relation both to the initial programmes and to the characters (hosts, actors and journalists) who marked those first seminal years. The perception of the quality standards of the time as now-unreachable distinguishes how its first audience describes the origins of the medium in Italy, often in contrast with a very pessimistic view of the contemporary TV scene.

As for the content of this first period of television programming, 'bottom-up' remembrances challenged and belied the simplism of the widely-held assumption regarding the principal mission of the Italian 'paleo-television',¹⁴ quite

¹³ *Invito alla televisione*, RAI – ERI, 1960

¹⁴ Paleo-television is a definition commonly used to indicate the first period of Italian TV's history, characterised by the scarcity of frequencies at disposal and by the monopoly of the Public service, whose mission was inspired by pedagogical and educative aims. The definition is opposed to Neo-television, a term that defines Italian TV's second age, shaped by the presence of commercial networks. Umberto Eco, 'TV: La trasparenza perduta', in *Sette anni di desiderio*, Milan, Bompiani, 1983, p. 163-179; Francesco Casetti, Roger Odin, 'De la paléo à la néotélévision', in *Communications*, (51) 1990, p. 9-26

often described merely as an instrument of education for the masses by both academics and important 'above-the-line' RAI managers of the time.¹⁵ As in most other European countries, Italian television was indeed characterised by the 'public-service' institutional model: until the mid seventies, RAI operated as a monopoly broadcaster, shaping its mission around the traditional public values of 'education and entertainment' established by the BBC.¹⁶

However, in the memories of early Italian TV viewers, only a few programmes stand out, and curiously they all belong to the popular entertainment *genre*, so often accused in the public debate of corroding the public-service ideal and largely responsible for the medium's initial and subsequent poor critical reputation.¹⁷ *Lascia o raddoppia?* ('Quit or double?'), one of the most prominent early Italian TV programmes

As confirmed by the early research conducted by psychologist Lidia De Rita on the television consumption in a small village in rural southern Italy,¹⁸ the most prominent programme of the time was undoubtedly *Lascia o raddoppia?*, a quiz show based on French and US models, hosted on RAI from 1955 by popular host Mike Bongiorno.

Alongside *Lascia o raddoppia?*, just a few other programmes capable of becoming 'television events' emerged: kids TV, *Carosello* (an anthology of commercials aired from 1957 after the evening news) and *Il Musichiere*, a televised musical contest inspired by the famous US show *Name That Tune*. It is interesting to note that popular entertainer Mario Riva, the show's host since 1956, often dealt with the issue of domesticating the new medium while presenting *Il Musichiere*. In his monologues, he addressed the families gathered at home, suggesting how to position the screen in order to watch the show to best effect at mealtimes, exhorting children to behave properly when using the set, and making fun of the fathers who pretended not to be interested in the new 'technological miracle' when they were actually very fond of it. *Il Musichiere*, a televised musical contest inspired by the famous US show *Name That Tune*.

Both *Il Musichiere* and *Lascia o Raddoppia?* have deeply shaped the collective memory of early Italian television, as confirmed by the analysis of the principal daily newspapers of that period and by further evidence in other media. For instance, the *Corriere dell'informazione*, a popular daily paper associated with the major Italian newspaper the *Corriere della sera*, featured two whole pages every week chronicling each episode of *Lascia o raddoppia?*. Moreover, in 1956, popular actor Antonio De Curtis (known as Totò) played the character of a *Lascia o raddoppia?* contestant in the 'blockbuster' movie *Totò, lascia o raddoppia?* (directed by Camillo Mastrocinque).



15 Ettore Bernabei, *L'uomo di fiducia*, Mondadori, 1999

16 Jerome Bourdon, *Du service public à la télé-réalité. Une histoire culturelle des télévisions européennes 1950-2010*, INA éditions, 2011

17 Jerome Bourdon, 'Old and New Ghosts. Public Service Television and the Popular. A History', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 7(3), 2004, p. 283-304

18 Lidia de Rita, *I contadini e la televisione: studio sull'influenza degli spettacoli televisivi in un gruppo di contadini lucani*, il Mulino, 1964.

However, the importance of these popular shows in the interviewees' memory is due not only to their appreciation for the shows themselves, but also to the prominence of these products in the public debate and in the popular media as a whole. Their remembrances help to advance the interpretation of the historical role of this popular content in the 'archaeology' of Italian television: in fact, another reason for their significance is the various 'cultures of viewing' that they were able to generate.

When television first appeared in Italy, the wide distribution of the receiver sets in private households was hindered by some major economic issues, such as the high price of the technology and the license fee imposed by the public broadcaster. Therefore, the establishment of TV as a domestic medium was far from taken for granted. As observed in other national contexts,¹⁹ in Italy too, the experience of viewing television consisted for some time of the act of 'going to watch television', made possible by the presence of the receiver sets in a variety of public venues (bars, political and religious associations, even movie theatres that temporarily eschewed their principal function).

Such popular shows as *Il Musichiere* and *Lascia o raddoppia?* (scheduled once a week in prime time) were exactly the type of programming capable of attracting the largest collective audience - both in public venues and in the private houses of the lucky few owners of receivers - because they were popular entertainment events scheduled weekly on Thursdays and Saturdays.

My fiancé always insisted on going to the cinema and watching *Lascia o raddoppia?* on Thursday. And I was always complaining, because I've never been a moviegoer, I preferred the ballrooms (M 4).

I used to take my girlfriend to see *Lascia o raddoppia?* at the movie theatre, because it aired on Thursday, the traditional 'date night' for fiancées (M 3).

When I was a girl, it was considered inappropriate for a woman to go to a bar and watch TV by herself. So I used to peek through the windows of the only bar in my village to see what I could of *Lascia o raddoppia?* (W 5).

During the first years, my little daughter used to go all the evenings at my neighbour's apartment to watch *Carosello*. And we established this rule: bedtime after *Carosello*! (W 5)

Once again, the gender issue arises: in fact, public spaces considered disreputable and inappropriate, such as the bar, were symbolically opened to women only if accompanied by their husbands or fiancés. Hence, working with memory as a tool for historical research has made it possible to better delineate the role of these examples of popular entertainment as 'social rituals'.

There was this bar, very close to my place: on Saturday, you could see whole families gathering there to see *Il Musichiere* (W 3).

An analysis of the Italian prime time schedules of this early stage of the medium shows the prominence of the *genre* of quiz and game shows, with programmes such as *Duecento al secondo* (modelled on the US show *Dollar a Second*), *Lascia o raddoppia?*, and *Il Musichiere*. Besides, a survey published in 1956 by the 'Servizio Opinioni' (a RAI's department committed to the quantitative analysis of the first television audience), stated the predilection of the audience for this specific TV *genre*, preferred to news, TV fiction and variety shows. Quiz and game shows were indeed particularly suitable to the collective and playful model of consumption typical of these first years, characterised by the scarcity of domestic receivers.

19 Anna McCarthy, *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space*, Duke University Press, 2001

However, by the beginning of the next decade, quiz and game shows gave way to a different leading genre, the variety show based on the combination of different sketches and performances, with programmes such as *Studio uno* (1961-1966), *Giardino d'inverno* (1961) and many others.²⁰

The establishment of television as a fully domestic medium was accomplished. The playful and collective model of consumption rooted in public spaces was progressively discarded in favour of a private and individual culture of viewing. As the quiz and the game show had seconded the perception of 'social ritual' typical of the first experience of television as it emerged by the witnesses' memories, so variety shows and TV fiction (the Italian 'sceneggiato') characterised this second phase, requesting a model of consumption less participative but more intimate and dedicated.

When we finally bought a TV set, I remember that we use to watch all the time that show performed by the Kessler twins [ndr. *Studio uno*]. (W 1)

In those years they used to air beautiful plays and dramas. I still remember that the first programme I watched when the TV set arrived in our house was *Piccole donne* by Majano.²¹ (W 6)

3 Conclusion

As the interviewees' recollections have shown, it is quite evident that the 'intimate histories and biographies' of the medium,²² pieced together through the stimulation and collection of private remembrances of 'ordinary witnesses', represent a crucial historical tool. The 'biography' of Italian television also includes the different ways in which it was received along its history, how its audience made sense of it, from the very beginning of the medium's consumption in the mid fifties.

In order to describe this historical process in depth, the main challenge of this methodology consists in comparing these 'individual pieces' of the mosaic with a broader scenario inferred from a variety of 'secondary' and intertextual sources. This broader scenario must surely be national in scope, although a transnational point of view is also required in order to delineate the specificity of a singular media context compared to other similar or dissimilar situations. I have sought to reflect on how the process of historical domestication of television in Italy has some special features of its own but also many similarities with the ways other European cultures made sense of this now-familiar medium when it first appeared in society²³. For instance, a positive and enthusiastic rhetoric on the medium was rooted in how the purchase of the first TV set was often closely associated with a radical change and improvement in the interviewees' lifestyle, due to Italy's post-war economic 'boom'. And a negative rhetoric in Italy concerned not only the risk of trivialising or damaging families' moral integrity but also gender issues that involved what was (or was not) appropriate for a woman to do.

As expected, the classical and transnational '*hope and fears*' model of narration represents the subtext around which many interpretative repertoires on the establishment of TV as a domestic medium are built. However, the paper has shown how researching television history through remembering and 'life-stories' has made it possible to enrich and deepen this model with some variations strictly connected to Italian social history.

20 Aldo Grasso, *Storia della televisione italiana*, Garzanti, 1992

21 A TV fiction based on the novel *Little Women or, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy* by Louisa May Alcott and directed by Anton Giulio Majano

22 David Morley, 'Television: Not So Much a Visual Medium, More a Visible Object', in Chris Jenks, eds., *Visual culture*, Routledge, 1995, p. 170-189

23 Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electronic Communications in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, 1990.

Biography

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