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Playing with the blanks of history: the example of contemporary historical dramas

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Since Herodotus, historians have claimed to tell the truth about the past, on the contrary to fictional writers who “invented stories” (Pomian, 1999: 16-24). Yet this distinction is not as simple as it sounds, since novelists draw their inspiration from the world they live in, and historical novelists, especially since the 19th century, work like historians do: with archives, traces from the past and scientific books. Their goal, still, is different: novelists seek to immerse their reader into a world of their own, asking for their “suspension of disbelief” whereas in scientific historical books footnotes, endnotes and constant references to sources and bibliography remind the reader that there is a reality outside of what’s written on the page (Pomian, 1999: 223-264).

Since the twentieth century, cinema, and particularly historical films, have challenged historians. Many of them, trained to study written texts and raised in an upper-class despise of the entertainment industry, have kept their distance, and sometimes been very critical, of audiovisual historical fiction and the “false ideas” they are supposed to put in the minds of ‘people’ (see for example Beevor, 2011, von Ranke, 1981:56-59 and Gray and Bell, 2013). In the words of Robert Rosenstone, “For those trained to write history, film is suspect, something of a rival, an enemy, a medium which is not only stealing our audience and distorting truths hard won in the archives, but also (apparently) making a lot of money doing so” (2013: xvii).

Notwithstanding, since the 1970s, a handful of historians such as Marc Ferro, Natalie Zemon Davis, Robert Rosenstone, Christian Delage, Antoine de Baecque, etc., have taken film as a valuable historical source and evaluated its pedagogical values: “film has given us tools to see reality in a new way – including the realities of a past which has long since vanished from our sight” (Rosenstone, 2013: 179). Their point is not to deny the fundamental difference between History and fiction, though:

Whatever they share in terms of interpretive structure, the relationship of data to discourse, historical books and films divide on one crucial issue: invention. The most radical theorists may talk of the fictive qualities of all narrative, but however metaphorical, historical narrative is always built on blocks of verifiable data. The dramatic film, by contrast (and here is where it parts company most sharply with the documentary and gets closest to the historical novel), indulges in the invention of characters, dialogue, incidents, and events; indeed, some historical films are made up of wholly invented characters placed into a documented setting or situation. This practice of invention may be enough to remove from the dramatic film the word ‘history’, but certainly not the ideas of historical “thinking” or “understanding”. Not if by that phrase we mean coming to grips with the issues from the past that trouble and challenge us in the present – questions of social change, gender relations, individual and group identity, class, ethnicity, war, colonialism, revolution, ideology, and nationalism. (Rosenstone, 2013: 183)

Television, and especially televisual fictions, has suffered even more from academic neglect, particularly among historians. Yet, inspired by the work of these film historians and television historians such as John O'Connor and Gary Edgerton, I would like to show here that some historical TV series from the 21st century also deserve our attention not only to point out what is “true” and what is “false”, but to better understand what they are doing to History and how they can help to better understand what we do as historians.

1. *Rome* (HBO, 2005-2007): a template for contemporary historical dramas

1.1. A British-American neo-peplum

In the years 2000, the U.S. premium cable channel HBO became a major producer and broadcaster of original “quality TV” dramas by revisiting well-known cinematic genres (Boutet, 2014). The most famous example of this strategy is *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), which modernized the ‘mafia film’ made popular in the 1970s by Italian-American directors Martin Scorsese, Brian De Palma and Francis Ford Coppola. In the first half of the 2000s, another – seemingly forgotten and outdated – cinematic genre, the peplum, was experiencing a revival on the big screen with box-office successes like *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000) and *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004). That is why HBO decided to go “all-in” with John Milius¹, William J. MacDonald² and Bruno Heller³’s project to tell once again – but with grit, blood and sex – the story of Julius Caesar and the first Roman emperors. This decision is not without irony since the peplum genre was chosen by Hollywood in the 1950s in the hopes of turning people’s eyes away from their television sets with the promise of gigantic settings and bigger-than-life personas and storylines (Aziza, 2009). The challenge for HBO was to prove true to its motto “It’s not TV, it’s HBO” and offer its subscribers a convincing cinematic experience in an exotic and “fresh” ancient setting.

Rome was therefore a huge gamble for the US premium cable channel, which spent 90 percent of the \$225 million the 22 episodes of the series have cost (Jaeglé, 2007). The remaining 10 percent were spent by its co-producer the BBC and RAI. Despite 7 Emmy Awards and mostly laudatory critics, *Rome*’s first season, retracing the rise and fall of Julius Caesar, attracted less than 9 million viewers in the USA and between 3 and 6 million in the UK (27 percent market share). Those numbers were satisfactory enough for HBO to order a second season, focused on Augustus, the first Roman Emperor. It aired 18 months later but was a flop in both countries and led to the cancellation of the series (5 seasons had been imagined by its creators). Yet in Italy the series was from the beginning “snubbed by Italos with anti-Yank disdain” (Vivarelli, 2005). According to RAI drama exec Paola Masini, “many Italian journalists and commentators just don’t want to see their history depicted by Anglo-Saxons” (Vivarelli, 2005). These reactions show how important generic conventions are when it comes to obtaining the viewers’ suspension of disbelief (Paul, 2014) and how nationally grounded these conventions are on television (especially on a public

¹ John Milius (1944-) is an American writer and director known for his work on the first two *Dirty Harry* films (writer), *Apocalypse Now* (writer), *Conan the Barbarian* (director) and *Red Dawn* (director). His eccentric personality was also one of the inspirations for the character of Walter Sobchack in *The Big Lebowski* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1998)

² William J. MacDonald (age unknown) is an American businessman, producer and occasional screenwriter. He had worked with Milius on the miniseries *The Rough Riders* (TNT, 1997).

³ Bruno Heller (1960-) is an American screenwriter and showrunner. *Rome* was his first significant work. Later he created *The Mentalist* (CBS, 2008-2015) and *Gotham* (Fox, 2014-2019).

channel like RAI), even when Italian viewers have been accustomed for generations to watch American TV series. In the case of *Rome*, U.S. cultural imperialism was probably hitting too close to home.

Indeed, even if *Rome* was the first English-speaking series entirely filmed in a non-English speaking country (Faingnaert, 2019), the pre-producing, the shooting at *Cinecittà* and the post-production was, like the entire cast of actors, entirely run in English by British and Americans. And their references were Shakespeare⁴, *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1961) and the BBC 1976-drama *I, Claudius* (Faingnaert, 2019), and not Riccardo Freda or Vittorio Cottafavi. That is why, on the one hand, the Irish-born Royal Shakespeare Company member Ciaràn Hinds appeared as perfectly believable for English-speaking viewers but was perceived as “a parody” by Italians, accustomed to older and bold - not to mention Italian-speaking – actors playing Caesar. On the other hand, in the “making of” documentaries of the DVD edition of the series – *The Rise of Rome* and *The Triumph of Caesar*, we hear Billy Budd, the series’ military trainer, complain twice about the Italians’ addiction to their mobile phones⁵. In general, these documentaries reveal the very “touristic” attitude of the English-speaking crew towards the location (Rome, the light, the history, the ‘authenticity’ they feel to be in the ‘exact spot’ where it happened⁶, etc.) and their Italian colleagues (their ‘aesthetic sense’ and ‘craftsmanship’), while we hear very few Italians speaking – very briefly in English – only to say that they are “proud” and that it is “fun” to work on such a “challenging project”.

1.2. A specific interpretation of Roman history

These documentaries, the DVD audio commentaries and Kristina Milnor’s account of her brief experience as a historical consultant for the series (Milnor, 2008:42-48) point to the fact that the staff seemed to rely much more on source material than on the recent works of historians, anthropologists and archaeologists in their quest for “authenticity”. As Aaron Rich has explained, in Hollywood, “authenticity was merely a marketing flourish. Standard practice in the industry involved visual research that considered a tremendous range of illustrated media from popular and scholarly sources. (...) This heterogeneous mix of source materials also structured history museums, dioramas, panoramas, historical literature, and historical painting in the 19th century, and it is the most common way modern people have experienced history for the past three centuries. In this way, the question of whether or not a film presents an authentic historical narrative misses the point; Hollywood filmmakers were much more interested in presenting familiar images that the audience would recognize from many earlier and well-circulated depictions of the past, regardless of their historical validity.” (2019: 154). For example, their representation of Vercingetorix seems essentially based on Julius Caesar’s *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (The Gallic Wars)⁷ and romantic 19th century literary and pictorial descriptions⁸, making him this formidable long-haired warrior and political leader with a moustache, when all the works of historians and archeologists since the 1980s largely debunked this myth (see Goudineau, 2001

⁴ *Julius Caesar* (1599) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1601-1608)

⁵ “The hardest thing was teaching them to get rid of their mobile phones.” (*The Rise of Rome*, around 15’50); “I learned very quickly that Italians love their mobile phones. They whined for their mobile phones from day one.” (*The Triumph of Caesar*, 12’05-12’12)

⁶ “What you get a sense of from the ruins that are left is that it was a real place, that is was a real city, and very like the cities we have today. I think it was very inspiring for the actors to be standing on the exact spot their characters stood on. It makes them real.” (Bruno Heller, *The Rise of Rome*, DVD edition, 04’00 – 04’10)

⁷ This book was instrumental in the writing of the series: Lucius Vorenus and Titus Pullo are briefly mentioned by Caesar (Gallego, 2012).

⁸ See for example Ernest Lavisse’s account of Gergovie and Alésia in his French textbook *Histoire de France: cours élémentaire* (multiple editions), or the paintings of Henri-Paul Motte, *Vercingétorix se rend à César* (Musée Crosatier, Le Puy-en-Velay, France, 1886) and Lionel Royer, *Vercingétorix jette ses armes aux pieds de César* (Musée Crosatier, Le Puy-en-Velay, France, 1899)

or the most recent book by Jean-Louis Brunaux, 2018). For Victor Faingnaert, this can be explained by the fact that Vercingetorix appears in the very first episode, where the series has to convince the viewers to enter into its world, a world that has to feel familiar, at least at first (2019).

Indeed, in the creators' minds, "authenticity" does not necessarily mean "historically accurate", but what *feels* real to them and their viewers, what will feel familiar enough to be recognizable (the Roman forum compared with the busy streets of Bombay) but strange enough to provoke interest and wonder⁹. It is a standard practice in Hollywood to combine historical details with entertainment and spectacle, often with a tinge of irony, to interest, amuse and educate the audience (Bann, 1984:3). "Bruno [Heller, the series' showrunner and co-creator] has made a big thing, and it's absolutely appropriate, about trying to divert yourself from what I call 'Holy Rome', which is the image we've always got from the movies, and try to completely rethink that, and put something else in its place. And you can put a modern Indian city in its place, Calcutta or Bombay. That immense mass of people, that riot of colors, that sense of smell, and noise, and busyness. And I think that's absolutely on the money", says historical consultant Jonathan Stamp in *The Rise of Rome* (11'55 – 12'22).

On the contrary to all the other historians and archeologists who have been asked for their advice and expertise at one point or another, the influence of Jonathan Stamp on *Rome* has been decisive (Faingnaert, 2019). This Classical Studies summa-cum-laude graduate from Oxford (Balliol College) had travelled all around the Mediterranean ancient sites for the UNESCO before becoming a documentary-maker for Channel Four and then the BBC in the 1990s. His favorite period is Ancient Rome, according to the IMDB website. He became the main historical consultant on *Rome*'s first season, and then a co-producer on its second season. Victor Faingnaert (2019) has shown that the characters of Pompey and Marc Anthony are largely based on Stamp's (slightly outdated but Oxford's favorite) bibliographical choices such as Ronald Syme's *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1939) and Zvi Yavetz's *Plebs and Princeps* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969).

The writers have also relied heavily on ancient historians' accounts of events, playing more or less consciously into Augustan propaganda: Pompey and Marc Anthony's moral weakness, Brutus' wounded pride, Cleopatra's manipulative skills are admittedly wonderful dramatic tools but most historians today see them as political distortions or 'embellishments' aimed at legitimizing Augustus' rise to power and position as Caesar's true heir (Desjardins, 2018: 92-95). Referred to as 'sensational historiography', ancient historians were indeed convinced that historical amplification through the elaboration of historical events was a unique and distinguished practice as it generated 'pleasing effects' and in turn, stimulated and engaged audiences (Cyrino, 2008: 33) For example, ancient Greek historian Polybius (c200-118 BC) comments on how Phylarcus (c215 BC) wrote not to present facts, but to engage his readers, writing 'carelessly' and never missing 'an opportunity to emphasize the lurid details' (Cufurovic, 2018: 7).

1.3 An intellectually stimulating interpretation of the 'silences of history'

Yet it would be unfair to characterize Jonathan Stamp's work as superficial or inaccurate, as did Florence Dupont in *Le Monde Diplomatique* (Dupont, 2007). Overlooking the difference between *mimesis* and *poesis* (Bessières, 2012), the anthropologist disapproved the series' portrayal of an 'eternal, Western man'. It is true that several times in the DVD documentaries we

⁹ "We wanted it to look both authentic and accurate, but strange and beautiful." (Bruno Heller, *The Rise of Rome*, DVD edition, 05'45 – 05'52)

hear members of the crew say that Ancient Romans are the Italian extras' "ancestors"¹⁰, that the actors fed off the Italian way of life and attitudes¹¹, drawing a direct line between Ancient and 21st-century Romans. Even if it is scientifically inaccurate, it is anyway dramatically necessary to create familiar and understandable characters the audience can relate to (Glévarec and Saint-Maurice, 2017). A reviewer quoted by Cufurovic reflected that by incorporating the characters of Pullo and Vorenus, the series was "able to remind us that these figures were people in all the complexity of motivation that we experience in people today" (Cufurovic, 2018:5). That is what director Alan Taylor explains when talking about the big triumph scene he shot in just two days for Episode 1.10: "It's the style of the show: we start very small, on the family fighting through the crowd, and only through her point of view do we get access to this big thing." (*The Triumph of Caesar*, 04'30 – 04'36). This choice of *mise en scène* has also an effect on how the audience understands history; "thus, Rome was able to shift popular conceptions of history away from just politics toward an intertwining with the social" (Cufurovic, 2018: 10).

Even if every work of fiction is based on the suspension of disbelief, in *Rome* the subjectivity and fictionality of the story is always reminded to the spectator through the presence of fictional or semi-fictional characters next to historical ones. "Rome accounted for popular conceptions of history by deviating from standard depictions to incorporate a series of 'accidental histories' whereupon the history of Rome is determined by unintended consequences, events and circumstances that, both thematically and narratively, worked towards 'subtle dislocations of unitary and monolithic power and historical agency' often found within individual actors like Julius Caesar" (Lockett quoted by Cufurovic, 2018:4). Therefore, *Rome* provides a version of History very close to contemporary academic historical research where "great men" are not in control of everything nor responsible for every historical event.

This game with the spectator and what he/she thinks he/she knows about Ancient History¹² is visible in the title of Episode 2, "How Titus Pullo Brought Down the Republic", identifying *Rome* as fiction right away: Titus Pullo being a fictional character, he can't *really* be responsible for the Fall of the Republic. It seems like the writers had a lot of fun with the character of Titus Pullo, a sort of Candide thrown in the middle of History: making him Cicero's executioner and Caesarion's biological father, for example. Vorenus and Pullo belong to the tradition of historical sagas (Ken Follett's novels for example) and epic miniseries (*Holocaust* being the most famous) where the fictional characters are always at the right place at the right time to "witness" History in the making. Fictional characters are indeed instrumental within the series to create links between historical figures and/or events, but also to keep the spectator interested and moved. Yet in *Rome* Vorenus and Pullo often seem like bulls in a china shop, stumbling on events, or even missing them (none of them is present when Caesar is killed). They introduce us to this strange world, but they don't understand it much better than the viewers do.

Moreover, the dramatization of Ancient history in *Rome* can provoke a healthy debate about what we know exactly about the past and how we know it (see Beard, 2007:5). We saw earlier that the series tends to rely heavily on ancient documents, sometimes lacking – or seemingly lacking – in a sound critical approach of what has been written and why. Yet, more

¹⁰ "This is about representing your own ancestors." (Billy Budd, *The Triumph of Caesar*, DVD edition, 12'55-13'00)

¹¹ "There's the Italian sense of *bella figura*, of a way of carrying yourself, a dignity, that was very useful for the actors. The actors, who all had to essentially live in Rome for up to two years, fed off that." (Bruno Heller, *The Rise of Rome*, DVD edition, 01'00 – 01'10); "In terms of background and authenticity, it was very important we got Roman extras. They talk Roman, they gesture Roman, they move Roman, they interact Roman." (Jonathan Stamp, Historical Consultant, *The Rise of Rome*, DVD edition, 01'11 – 01'25); "In terms of the art department, hair and make-up and costume and photography, there's definitely something Italian in there. They have some instinct for beauty, some instinct to make things slightly lyrical. I think it has given us a level of reality which has been a fantastic addition." (Julian Farino, Director of Episode 4, *The Rise of Rome*, DVD edition, 02'11 – 02'30)

¹² Even if the teaching of Latin is less common in U.S. high schools than in Italy or France, the Fall of the Roman Republic is part of the World History class American students receive before they finish their secondary education.

often than not, the series also hints at the fact that ancient documents may be lying, or at least that they are not telling us everything. It would be naïve, and scientifically inaccurate, to think that we know exactly how crucial and well documented events such as Caesar's or Cicero's deaths happened: Plutarch, Strabo, Appian and Cassius Dio do not agree on the details (where was Cicero killed, what did Caesar say, etc.) and literary license is already present in their accounts (for the complete analysis, see Desjardins, 2018). Yet within the genre conventions of a historical drama, *Rome's* creator could not show 3 or 4 slightly different versions of Caesar's assassination. They had to choose, and instead of following one specific account, they picked the details they found dramatically interesting in each one (whereas an historian would pick the ones he/she thinks are the closest to the truth). Also, a written account of an event can leave out some details (where were so and so, what were they doing at that exact time, where and when was Caesar stabbed, by whom, etc., not to mention all the visual details about the costumes, haircuts, light and setting), an audiovisual *mise en scène* has to show the entirety of the scene, and answer questions historians do not usually think about. So, the writer and the director have to "fill in" the gaps left by historical accounts and the subsequent scientific work by historians. And they have to do so in a way that feels both believable and interesting to the contemporary audience. Moreover, the choice made by *Rome's* creators "shook preconceived notions of Caesar's death by making it appear as an accidental historical event. (...) Through the displacement of hierarchies between fictional and historical actors, the coherence of conventional historiography is transformed to illustrate the contingency of historical action" (Cufurovic, 2018: 10).

Probably the biggest "gap" the series' creators needed to fill is the role of women (Perrot, 1998). They created major female characters belonging to every social class: the slave Eirene (Pullo's love interest), plebeian Niobe (Vorenus' wife) and her daughters, and patrician Atia (Caesar's niece, mother of Octavian/Augustus), Ottavia (Atia's daughter) and Servilia (Caesar's lover and Brutus's mother). They are all portrayed as having a major – albeit hidden – influence on History. For example, in the series, if Caesar is murdered on the Ides of March, it is because it was the day Vorenus didn't show up as his bodyguard in the Senate because he had just discovered his wife's infidelity (1.10). The murder is also "explained" as Servilia's vengeance after being rejected by Caesar. Furthermore, one of the major storylines of the two seasons is the rivalry between Atia and Servilia, which makes complex political debates and uncertain alliances more understandable to the viewers. This portrayal of powerful and evil women was of course also designed to appeal to the 21st-century audience of the series (Cyrino, 2008 :3), but it was also appealing to historians who work more and more on gender history and try to understand the past beyond written accounts, studying more closely than ever archeological artefacts.

So, *Rome* made television's history by the scale and ambition of its *recreation* of Ancient Rome, by its "fresh" and modern take on ancient political and social history. Of course, the violence and the sex scenes – HBO's trademark – made it very appealing to the viewers, as well as the exotic setting of Ancient Rome and a critical view of political leaders, but the series was also right away very appealing to historians by tackling visually and quite seriously for the first time new scientific territories such as gender history and *alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life). It revived intense debates about what historians know, can know and don't know about the past (Bessières, 2012) but also showed how TV series can help historians and ordinary viewers alike to *question* the past.

2. History, memory and oblivion in the French WW2 drama *Un Village français* (F3, 2009-2017)

2.1. Giving a voice to ordinary French citizens during World War 2

Un Village français (France 3, 2009-2017) is another historical drama which pushes its viewers to question the past, this time a much more recent and politically sensitive one. In 7 seasons and 72 episodes, the series follows a dozen of fictional ordinary French citizens (a doctor, three teachers, several policemen, two housewives, a farmer, a worker, a businessman, etc.) during the German Occupation (1940-1944) and after (mostly in 1945 but some flash-forwards are set in the 1950s, 1970s, 1990s and early 2000s). On the contrary to *Rome*, there are no real historical figures portrayed on screen, and the town, Villeneuve, does not exist. Yet the events, laws and political decisions that impact the life of the characters really happened. Its creators (Emmanuel Daucé, Frédéric Krivine, Philippe Triboit and historical consultant Jean-Pierre Azéma) wanted to show how people's opinions can change over time, how political sides can become clearer, or more confused, how someone can choose to collaborate in a given situation but will then help the Resistance in another. The ambition was to break with the judgemental discourse of numerous World War 2 narratives which depicted collaborators as villains and Resistance fighters as heroes. At the centre of the show was the ambition to evoke an empathetic response from the audience towards every character, even towards those who were on the "wrong side of history". "*Un Village français* shows how people break bad, both morally and socially, when their world is shattered", stated Emmanuel Daucé (Boutet, 2017b).

The series received laudatory critics and attracted an average of 3.5 million viewers each week (it was a big success for France 3, a public channel usually watched by older citizens). The portrayal of the Occupation as a "grey area" and the complex psyche of the characters was well accepted. It had been demonstrated by numerous historians, starting with Jean-Pierre Azéma, the series' historical consultant, but also by Henry Rousso, Pierre Laborie and others, but TV documentaries failed to show it to a large audience, because they concentrated on the "bad guys" of History, Hitler, Pétain and Laval, but did not interview ordinary people (Maeck, 2009: 376-378). To fill that void and stress their close relationship with the reality of that time, every two episodes of *Un Village français* were followed by a short documentary where Jean-Pierre Azéma explained a specific point of History, followed by ordinary French citizens telling their memories of that time (Boutet 2017a: 10-11).

Yet in season 6 and 7, when the series touched more recent parts of the French past, namely the Liberation and the return of the Republic in 1944-1945, some viewers, and especially the members of an association for the memory of communist resistance fighters (the ANACR), went vocal. They wrote to the Head of Fiction at France 3, Dana Hastier, to complain about the series' depiction of the brutal murder of imprisoned French militias by drunk communist resistance fighters while Villeneuve was celebrating its Liberation from the Germans (6.9). To them, the storyline was based on minor and scattered historical events and harming the memory of the fight of the communists to rebuild French democracy¹³. As a matter of fact, the whole point of the last two seasons of *Un Village français* is to show how memory constantly rewrites the past to allow people to move forward, whereas the work of historians is to understand and explain what really happened. Paradoxically, these seasons were shot from 2015 to 2017 and at that time most historical witnesses were dead or too old to speak in front of a camera, and the follow-up

¹³ During my research on *Un Village français*, Frédéric Krivine shared this letter with me.

documentaries disappeared, leaving the viewers with “just” the fictional parts of the story (Boutet 2017a: 198-209). So precisely when “memories” left the documentary part of the series did they become front and center in the storylines.

2.2. The *mise en scène* of memory as a necessary process

In season 6, the disappearance of the “worst guys” of the story, the Nazis, forced the French characters to face their divisions and contradictions. The storylines show the difficulty of “getting out – mentally and politically – of the war”, the need to settle scores, the difference between justice and revenge, all of that while putting hastily a political authority in place to avoid a new military Occupation (this time, by the Americans). Headwriter Frédéric Krivine, the son and nephew of disillusioned communist militants (his uncle, Alain Krivine, created the extreme-left movement La Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) and was twice a presidential candidate), depicted a fierce power struggle between Gaullists and communists and showed the return of peace as a victory of pragmatic grim politicians over the real and idealist war heroes – of both sides. Season 6 ends with former school director, resistance fighter and new Gaullist mayor *pro tempore* Jules Bériot (played by François Lariquet) giving a resitancialist¹⁴ speech on the newly baptized Marie-Germain square: “Marie Germain [the local Gaullist resistance leader who has been cruelly murdered in the very last days of the German occupation by a French policeman and collaborator] is the symbol of the Resistance which was the attitude of *all* Villeneuve’s inhabitants during these last five terrible years [...]. She is the soul of France, a France united against its invaders, united around General de Gaulle, united around the National Council of the Resistance, where everyone has a part to play, in a more just, more democratic community, ready to build a new and free country.” (6.12) This lie – visually emphasized by the strange looks exchanged by the ‘real’ resistance fighters from Villeneuve hearing the speech – is shown as being the price to pay to reconcile the French population and give legitimacy to the new Republic (whose second draft of a Constitution would be approved by popular vote in 1946).

Historians working on memory, such as Alistair Thomson (1990: 25-31), have found that the way people remember such and such moment of their life is influenced by historical, economic, political and cultural forces at play in the society they live in. The seventh and last season focuses on the necessity of “lying”, or at least of rewriting the past, and shows this process as a psychological way to be able to grieve and move forward (The Popular Memory Group, 1982: 250-252). On an intimate level, it is shown through the opposite attitudes of two female characters grieving their love affair: communist resistance fighter Suzanne (played by Constance Dollé) is able to rewrite her relationship with her dead lover Marcel Larcher (played by Fabrizio Rongione) as beautiful and fulfilling, when in fact his ideals and heroic persona often conflicted with her feelings and emotional needs (7.2). It allows her to build a stable relationship with her new lover after the war as well as to act as a healthy mother figure to Marcel’s orphaned teenage son Gustave (played by Maxim Driesen). Krivine describes her as “healthily neurotic”, not to say “well-balanced”. On the other side of the mental spectrum is Hortense (played by Audrey Fleurot), who can’t forget Heinrich, her Nazi lover who reinvented himself as an American intelligence officer and married the daughter of a U.S. officer to guarantee his safety. In the last episodes, flash-forwards show Hortense as a mental patient and a painter in 1975, whose determination to exhibit Heinrich’s portrait leads to bad press and the vandalizing of Villeneuve’s local museum (7.10). Her unwillingness to forget, or rewrite, parts of her past makes her unable to live outside of a mental hospital (“if my life [referring to Heinrich’s portrait] hurts people, you should have left me rot in my hole”, she tells her baffled husband Daniel before the exhibition’s opening). She is literally traumatized by her war experience (Caruth, 1995: 4), even if she cannot

¹⁴ *Resitancialism* is a concept coined by historian Henry Rousso (*Le Syndrome de Vichy*, Paris, Seuil, 1987) to define the political consensus in afterwar France that the “real France” had always been with de Gaulle and the clandestine resistance fighters and that Vichy was not a legitimate political regime (albeit a legal one).

be recognized as a “victim” of the Nazis. The series helps us acknowledge the existence of acceptable and unacceptable “truths” at different moment in time and in different situations, and understand how a changing social context can allow some people to express their sufferings, or in other situations silence them.

2.3 Historical truth vs. political memory

Un Village français also shows how politicians can deliberately rewrite history to gain or keep their power, how commemorations and public memory are highly political. In the 5th season of the series, we saw young maquisards organize a World War One commemoration on November 11th, 1943, just like they did for real in Oyonnax (Collard and Grumberg, 2016). It was a real act of heroism and resistance, which gave hope to the entire population that victory against the Germans could happen in a near future. Yet two years later, the new Gaullist and communist political leaders of Villeneuve, now battling in a fierce municipal campaign, have no intention to commemorate a time when they were united against a common enemy. Instead, they chose to celebrate their “own” heroes: on the one hand the communist Marcel Larcher, who shot a German officer in 1941 and was executed by the Germans in 1943, on the other hand four young maquisards who were killed when the Germans raided the Maquis after the November 11 celebration in 1943. These two scenes are following each other in episode 7.4, stressing each time the way History is rewritten to serve political purposes. The communist candidate, Edmond Lherbier (played by Antoine Mathieu) celebrates Marcel Larcher as “the perfect partisan”, when the viewers know perfectly that Lherbier kept complaining during the war about Marcel’s repeated insubordination and arrangements with “the party line”. On the day of the Gaullist celebration, former maquis leader Antoine (played by Martin Loizillon) attempts to clear his conscience by saying that his four comrades did not die as heroes to protect the others maquisards, but that he simply left them behind because they had to run for their lives and these four were not fast enough. The audience, with the maquisards’ parents among them, is flabbergasted and Gaullist politicians Lanzac (played by Patrick Raynal) and Raymond Schwartz (played by Thierry Godard) have to save the day by explaining that they are heroes all the same because they were maquisards killed by the Germans, no matter why. And then they all sing *La Marseillaise* in relief. This scene reminds the audience that sometimes, even when the truth is said, it cannot be heard.

Resistancialism, the celebration of heroes were political necessities to rebuild France as quickly as possible after the war. It took a generation and the political turmoil of May 1968 so that the grey areas of the collaboration and the sufferings of the Jews could finally be acknowledged. In episode 7.11, a flash-forward shows us a conversation in 1975 between Tequiero (born in 1940, who has no recollection of the war), his cousin Gustave (the son of the communist hero Marcel Larcher, born in 1931) and his adoptive father Daniel (born at the very beginning of the 20th century, who was the mayor of Villeneuve from 1940 et 1943). Tequiero asked them what they did for the Jews during the war, and Gustave quite abruptly explains to him that they felt sorry for what the Germans did to them (even if they didn’t know the half of it and knew very few of them) but they had other things to fight for, namely their own lives. And then he reminds his cousin that his own father was killed by the Germans during the war, and the viewers understand that he regrets that the fight and sacrifices of communist resistance fighters have now been forgotten, mostly because of the discovery of Joseph Stalin’s crimes. By showing how memory and oblivion work on an individual and a social scale, *Un Village français* stresses the importance of the work of historians and the complexity of reality: there are no characters who are always good, and none who are always bad and the effectiveness of the narrative engage the viewer will all of them at one point or another, expanding their life experience (Glévarec and Saint-Maurice, 2017). In episode 7.5, one maquisard explains to his comrades that it is “impossible to transcribe the entirety of what happened to someone who wasn’t there” and that

“the past leaves traces, but they are always partial or damaged”. So “people take what happened and make a story with it: people with little imagination will do journalism, smart people will write History, and geniuses will create *drama*.”

This deliberately provocative assertion shows how self-reflective *Un Village français* has become through the years, its creators getting more and more conscious of what they were doing, reading plenty of academic books about World War 2, meeting viewers who shared their World War 2 family stories with them and discussing with historians, teachers and students. The writers, producers, technicians and actors alike had a clear idea of where the line between History and fiction is, and how political every stance about World War 2 history is (Boutet: 2017a).

To conclude, we would like to quote Robert Rosenstone once again:

To change the medium of history from the page to the screen, to add images, sound, color, movement and drama, is to alter the way we read, see, perceive, and think about the past. (...) This kind of history is a challenge, a provocation, and a paradox. If its world can never be taken literally, the history film creates rich images, sequences, and visual metaphors that help us to see and think about what has been. Its truths are metaphoric and symbolic, not literal. The history film not only challenges traditional History, but helps return us to a kind of ground zero, a sense that we can never really know the past, but can only continually play with, reconfigure, and try to make out of the traces it has left behind. (Rosenstone, 2013: 186)

By offering specific interpretations of the past and deliberately playing with what we do and don't know about it, historical fictions like *Rome* and *Un Village français* can help viewers and historians alike to understand, and to question, what is History. In the words of Mirela Cufurovic, “it is not historical accuracy or film as historical evidence that matters, but the historical questions and debates that film raises for its audience and the historical profession regarding the past it presents and its implication on history” (2018: 2). In her study of *Rome*'s online reviews on IMDB, Amazon, Tv.com and Metacritic, she found that “by drawing together film as a form of art with history as storytelling, the reviewers emphasize the vitality of the filmmaker's creative freedom in order to attract and educate the audience. (...) As film continues to grow into a sophisticated and popular medium, historians ought to embrace it as a new mode of historical investigation that has the ability to consider and intertwine popular imagination with historical reality.” (Cufurovic, 2018:4 ; 11).

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