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Dhoest, Alexander

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Identifying with the nation

Viewer memories of Flemish TV fiction

Alexander Dhoest
University of Antwerp

ABSTRACT This article investigates viewer memories of former Flemish television fiction in order to research how its representation of Flanders has influenced national identification. Viewer memories show strong patterns, as the same serials are positively remembered by most respondents. The strength and fondness of these memories suggests that these serials became part of collective memory. The importance of 'Flemishness' also becomes apparent through the emphasis on realism and recognition. All the respondents said that they preferred domestic drama to imported serials, portraying 'typical' situations of the past using Flemish dialects. They strongly identified with this image, and by sharing fond memories, they form a national 'mnemonic' community.

KEYWORDS *collective memory, national identity, oral history, television drama*

A common assumption in much writing about television fiction, particularly in Europe, concerns its strong connection with national identities. Domestic fiction is deemed to be important and worthy of protection because it 'reflects', and thus safeguards, national identities. This argument has inspired resistance to the 'Americanization' of television and has become part of the commonsensical discourse about television, both in politics and the media. However, cultural theory has deconstructed the notion of 'essential' (rather than variable) national identities being 'reflected' (rather than constructed) in the media. According to Stuart Hall (1992, 1996), national identities can be considered as discursive constructions representing the nation as unified. If television fiction has any relation with national identity, it is primarily by representing, and thus producing, discourses about the nation – or to draw on Anderson (1991), by producing images of an imagined community.

While there is an extended literature on the relation between television (fiction) and national identity, the actual role of TV fiction in the formation of national identities has been little explored empirically. A major obstacle for such research is the challenge of investigating a concept as abstract and multilayered as 'national identity' in concrete, everyday media use. It is one thing to reflect theoretically on the role of television in forming national communities, but it is another thing altogether to locate this in actual viewing processes. Do viewers use domestic drama to reflect on or form a national identity? Do TV images form or confirm (cultural) self-images, and do they lead to identification? These are pertinent questions, often positively answered based on mere assumptions (for a rare exception, see Griffiths, 1996). The aim of this article is to explore these questions empirically, through historical audience research, based on oral history interviews. In the process, it argues that this is a very valuable method for (historical) media research, although the evidence that it offers is necessarily indirect. Rather than disclosing how television discourses were 'actually' decoded, this research analyses viewer discourses on television, constructed as part of the interviewing process. However, when the interview material is approached with enough caution, this apparent weakness may be turned into a strength, as such research allows for analysis of the discursive creation of memories and communities, which takes place not only within, but also outside of, the interview situation.

A related point concerns the usefulness of such research in debates on period drama, the kind of drama with which this text mostly deals. Particularly in the British context, period and heritage drama are often considered as 'ideologically suspect', mostly based on textual and contextual analysis. Critics such as Higson (1993) have criticized heritage drama for offering an embellished and highly selective (imperialist, upper class) view of the past, mythologizing an exportable image of 'Englishness' (see Dhoest, 2004c).[1] However, reception research (be it historical or contemporary) may offer a very different view on the actual meanings of this kind of drama for 'ordinary' viewers, counterbalancing the often condescending treatment that it has received so far.

Flemish national television

Media can contribute to the formation of national identities in different ways. First, modern mass media were often formally organized on the national level, which contributed to the formation of national communities of media use (Anderson, 1991; Gellner, 1983). Public broadcasting television, in particular, was often explicitly mobilized in the formation of national unity. It provided shared images and experiences, unifying viewers from diverse backgrounds (Abercrombie, 1997; Ellis, 2000; Newcomb, 1997; Price, 1995). Second, television can address the nation explicitly, for

example in programmes on the royal family or national events (Cardiff and Scannell, 1987). However, programmes do not need to intend to unite the nation or explicitly address national issues in order to lead to cultural identification (Bourdon, 1992). Third, popular programmes such as soaps may contribute equally to the formation of a national viewer community (Carson and Llewellyn-Jones, 2000). As claimed by Edensor (2002), it is necessary to take into account the importance of everyday utterances of popular culture in the formation of national identities. In this context, the (European) audience preference for domestic serial fiction (drama, soaps and sitcoms) is notable. It is explained mostly in terms of recognition, cultural proximity and identification (Bechelloni, 1999; Biltereyst, 1992; Buonanno, 1998; Paterson, 1997).

Flanders is the Dutch-language community in Belgium which, since the 1950s, has gradually become a federal state. Although Belgium remained the national context in political terms, in cultural terms Flanders has become a more self-evident (sub)national frame of reference, as cultural life is divided mostly across language lines. Contributing to this process, from its beginnings in 1953 television broadcasting was split into a Flemish Dutch-language and a Walloon French-language division. The Flemish Belgische Radio en Televisie – Nederlandse uitzendingen (BRT – Dutch-language broadcasts), having little competition at the time, could literally unite the Flemish viewers in front of their sets. The broadcasting officials were greatly dedicated to the project of Flemish 'national' cultural emancipation and education (Van den Bulck, 2001). Domestic fiction was a central category in this endeavour, which explains the predominance of period drama (20 out of 32 series and serials), often based on literary sources (15 out of 32), in the era of monopolistic public broadcasting (until 1989). In the 1960s particularly, many short serials represented the rural Flanders of the first half of the 20th century, constructing a strong discourse about Flemish history, culture, language and national character (Dhoest, 2003). Analysis of policies and production practices shows that the broadcasters of this period deliberately aimed to educate the viewers into 'good Flemings' (Dhoest, 2004a). For these reasons, the present research focuses on the period of the public broadcasting monopoly between 1953 and 1989.

As little qualitative information on viewing processes in this period is available, this research uses 'oral history' interviews with viewers. These provide a rich and useful source of information which is not based on indirect assumptions about the viewers deduced from textual analysis or broadcasting policies. That being said, these interviews are also indirect as they are based on representations of the actual viewing process. Moreover, they are retrospective, presenting memories that are constructed in the present within a particular interviewing context, reflecting on the past but inevitably influenced by subsequent events. Nostalgia is a powerful sentiment in accounts of television of the past, particularly among older viewers who tend to contrast television in the present negatively with an

idealized past (Gauntlett and Hill, 1999; Hackl, 2001; Healey and Ross, 2002; Tulloch, 1992).

Annette Kuhn's notion of 'memory text' is useful to describe the recorded act of remembering where the past is produced. Memory texts are the result of 'memory work', the staging and performing of memories in accounts of the past (Kuhn, 2002, 2004). When interpreting memory texts, it is important not to approach them as a transparent source of information about the past, rather as contemporary discourses representing the past. In judging such accounts of the past, their relation to the present is crucial, but so is the realization that there is no such thing as an unmediated account of the past (van Dijck, 2004). As noted by Radstone (2000), memories are representations rather than reflections of the past, but they also have a relation to lived experience, which confirms their value as a method to research the past. By analysing themes, discursive patterns and emphases in oral history interviews, we can learn about the ways in which television fiction became part of collective 'national' memory, if at all.

For this research, 40 respondents of more than 60 years of age were interviewed; people who witnessed the whole analysed period. To chart the appreciation by a broad audience (rather than any minority), a varied sample was selected through snowballing. The respondents came from all Flemish provinces and were divided equally in terms of gender and class (deduced here from the level of education and employment). First, questions were asked about spontaneous memories of domestic fiction between 1953 and 1989; second, about the broader viewing context and preferences. Finally, using a list of titles, all the serial drama from this period was discussed. The interviews were fully transcribed and systematically analysed, looking for patterns, but remaining attentive to exceptional responses. To control the length of this text, only short (but representative) quotes are given as an illustration.

Because of the abstract nature of the concept of 'national identity', this was not addressed directly in the interviews in order to avoid confusing or leading the respondents. Instead, drawing on the above conceptualization of national identities as discursive constructions, viewer memories of textual discourses on the nation were investigated. Arguably, images that are remembered by most viewers have become part of collective memory, an important constituent of national identity (Conway, 2003; Misztal, 2003; Sturken, 1997). The term 'collective memory' is used here to refer to individuals' shared memories. Particular attention was given to the evaluation of the remembered images, as positive memories may be a further indication of their importance to collective memory.

This article focuses on evaluative statements in the interviews. First, it investigates what the respondents liked about the programmes and which operational definition of 'quality' they used in the process. Then, it develops the three main (and related) points of appreciation: realism, recognition and 'Flemishness', arguing that all of these testify to the

role of television fiction in the creation of national identity. These three criteria were spontaneously used by most of the respondents, but they were also raised explicitly at the end of the interview, as they came out of a previous analysis of press reviews (see Dhoest, 2004b). Therefore, throughout this article the respondents' comments will be linked to the reviewer comments, and to conclude, the relationship between both will be discussed.

Before going deeper into the respondents' evaluations, let us briefly sketch some patterns in viewer memories.[2] Spontaneous memories of Flemish TV fiction between 1953 and 1989 are selective, as the viewers mostly mention two titles out of 32. The first series ever, *Schipper naast Mathilde* (*Skipper Near Mathilde*; BRT, 1955) was named by 33 respondents, and the prototypical 'peasant drama' *Wij, heren van Zichem* (*We, the Lords of Zichem*; BRT, 1969) by 21. On presenting the respondents with a list of titles, 12 programmes were remembered by more than 30 respondents, with many other programmes being virtually forgotten. Apart from a few comedies, most of the best-remembered programmes were popular period serials evoking similar memories, which suggests that they became part of collective memory (at least for this generation). In evaluating this fiction, most respondents use similar arguments.

Quality

One consistency across the interviews concerns the predominance of positive memories. If the respondents remember a programme (by more than its title), they mostly have fond memories of it. One could say that this is obvious, as people only watch what they like, a remark also made by some of the respondents. Hedwig's (67) response is exemplary:

> All the series I watched I thought were good. I simply didn't watch the things that didn't interest me. Quite logical, actually.[3]

However, this is not as self-evident as it seems. Until the spread of cable distribution in the 1970s there were few alternatives, so if one wanted to watch television, public broadcaster programmes were the only option. As many respondents remarked, they did not have much choice at the time, which is one of the reasons that they watched the same programmes to a great extent.

The respondents appreciated most of the remembered fiction, or at least that is how they remember it. It is difficult to recapture their appreciation at the time, and the nostalgic overtones in their memories are undeniable. Often, the respondents spontaneously contrasted the fictional programming of the past to current offerings, and they mostly preferred the past. For example, Roger (63) stated:

> In the past, the quality of television was much higher than now. Now, some things are shown that shouldn't be shown.

Contemporary sitcoms, particularly soaps, were often criticized, which fits within the 'moral hierarchy of programmes' described by Alasuutari (1992). A recurring point of criticism was the contemporary abundance of 'vulgarity', sex and violence. Thus, Josée (68) comments:

> I think it was better before than now. Now it is murder and sex and brutalities . . . That's what it is, and violence.

Remarkably, while the fiction of the past was often historical and therefore objectively more distant from the respondents' everyday lives, nevertheless they thought it represented life more accurately than contemporary drama. For example, Delphine (75) commented:

> They represented everything as we have known it in our own lives. In my view, it was much more spontaneous, more ordinary, not as much sex and not as contrived.

Very rarely did the respondents state that Flemish fiction has become better over the years, a view most prominently (and tellingly) expressed by a journalist, Pol (60), commenting on the increasing professionalism of Flemish television from the 1980s.

While the positive descriptions of the past seemed to be partly inspired by criticism of current television, it would be a token of bad faith not to take the overwhelmingly positive accounts seriously and ascribe them primarily to nostalgic hindsight. The fondness and detail of many memories show that these are treasured and coveted, which is an indication of the enthusiasm with which domestic TV fiction was watched at the time. Turning to concrete points of praise, most respondents thought that the quality of domestic fiction was good. They commented on its 'high level', its high production values and particularly on the good, 'spontaneous' and 'lifelike' acting. For example, Josée (68) comments on domestic series:

> I thought they were of a high level and were very nicely acted . . . Yes, I thought they were nicely acted and the setting was beautiful and the music was appropriate.

This overwhelmingly positive evaluation is linked to a general appreciation of the portrayal of life 'as it was'. Talking about popular drama, Frans (67) comments:

> Among common people that came across best. You see, those were all situations occurring in daily life. It wasn't faked, it was all spontaneous and acted spontaneously by good actors.

This statement and many others confirm the importance of TV fiction as a source of images of everyday life in the past.

These positive memories contrast strongly with the negative press response to Flemish television fiction. Hardly any aspect found mercy in the press; formal points of criticism included the low standard of programmes, their amateurism, theatricality, bad acting, unnatural dialogues, weak

scripts, clumsy direction and slow pace. As to content, much serial fiction was called old-fashioned and folkloric, and many critics denounced the obsession with rural life in the past (Dhoest, 2004b). While the massive ratings for most domestic fiction always have suggested a divergence between the appreciation of reviewers and a majority of viewers, the interviews definitively confirm this. In contrast, while public broadcasters have long been criticized for not being able to judge audience taste, the interviews suggest that they did not get it completely wrong.

The viewers conceptualize 'quality drama' differently from most press critics. In Flanders, as elsewhere (see Caughie, 2000), the term 'quality drama' is used mostly with reference to 'serious' highbrow television, in particular classic adaptations. While some of the positively-remembered drama falls within this category, most of it has a popular, often humorous overtone. In fact, what is most appreciated is 'the popular' in comedy or folk tales, showing 'common people'. For example, when asked to explain her preference for folk drama, Delphine (75) says she thought it was popular but not vulgar, as it was 'on the level of the man in the street'. André (83) does think it was vulgar, at times:

> It could sometimes be coarse, but you took that on board, because at the time it would effectively also have been that way.

Thus, a certain degree of coarseness is excused as it is considered to be characteristic of the period portrayed. Similarly, the persistent focus on Flemish farmers in 'peasant drama' was not criticized by the respondents, but rather appreciated. As Jeanne (63) says:

> I really liked the fact that they were rustic. I really liked that, as it was, before. Now it isn't like that anymore . . . That's why those series interested me so.

Criticism of these series was ascribed mostly to the cultural élite or, as Gerard (68) puts it:

> I liked those series a lot at the time. People who have swallowed a dictionary may have a different opinion, but I really thought they were good.

This last comment is interesting, as the sample did include viewers of higher classes and levels of education, but hardly any of them displayed a condescending attitude. Generally, most of the respondents were positive about the same fiction and there were no clear class distinctions in the interviews. Tellingly, the respondent with the highest level of education, An (60), a female university professor, was quite positive:

> I greatly appreciate the people who have made that, because you know they mostly had to work with modest means. And I also think we have some very good actors . . . So I think we can be quite proud of what was realised.

When subsequently asked what she thought of the press criticism of these series, she replied:

> I think the further you go back in the past, the more the press journalists thought they could operate as moral crusaders and that they could impose aesthetic norms.

This awareness of the critical stance of the press raises questions concerning the relationship between press and audience responses, a point that will be taken up later in this article.

Realism

The respondents did not often use the term 'quality' explicitly, but they made many quality assessments using particular criteria. When asked why they liked domestic fiction, they mostly referred to realism; the reflection of life 'as it was'. For example, commenting on one period series, Marc (60) says: 'It was a very beautiful in terms of realism, the situations were caught directly from life.' Later, he comments that many series were realist:

> They make you think about things you have experienced yourself or people you know well. Also situations you recognize within your circle of friends or family.

For period drama, he based his judgement of realism upon accounts from his mother: 'Indeed, there are some things I have heard my mother tell. That it really was that way in the past.' References to 'the real' were ubiquitous in the interviews, in comments on acting that was 'true to life' and situations that were 'caught from real life', showing things that 'could really happen'. George's (90) comment is exemplary:

> It was really played so nicely and it was so nicely put together that you would think it was real. All the things you saw you could recognise from everyday situations. Really true!

Such a stress on 'the real' is evidence of 'referential' reading, the term used by Liebes and Katz (1990) to describe readings stressing the relationship between programmes and real life. The respondents' praise for the realism of period drama is also in line with Alasuutari's (1992) claim that the attachment to realism explains why programmes depicting the modest simple life such as period drama are valued more highly than overly romantic soaps. In the same vein, Höijer (1998) suggests that viewers are less involved with the glamorous than with social realist fiction, the latter creating a much stronger illusion of reality, allowing viewer recognition and identification. Indeed, on the rare occasions that the respondents in this research did have reservations about realism, these mostly concerned exaggerations and contrived situations, in particular in comedy. At the other end of the spectrum, 'arty' productions were criticized. Marc (60) commented that the more experimental series were beyond him: 'It has to remain realist for me and not too complicated.'

Confirming the importance of realism, at the end of the interview, when explicitly asked if they thought that Flemish fiction was realist, most respondents answered positively. Rosa (66) said that they showed things 'that could really happen', and Frida (71) said: 'You could imagine such situations yourself.' Realism is conceptualized here as 'plausibility'; the most dominant of the six viewer conceptualizations of realism distinguished by Alice Hall (2003). Period drama, in particular, was considered to be a true account of life in the past, which could help people to learn about it. As André (83) said:

> Popular series were realist at that time. In that way, you could know how things were done then . . . At that time, people had to live in very poor circumstances, the houses had soil on the floor. It is a realist representation of those people, they were slaves, the children also had to work.

This response is one of many suggesting that TV fiction was used to construct an image of the Flemish past. Realism may be a basic criterion for judging any fiction, but as noted by Biltereyst (1995), viewers display a much stronger referential attitude towards domestic drama, valuing realism more highly.

Language use is one particular context within which many of the respondents referred to realism. Textual analysis disclosed the frequent use of dialect in serial fiction at the time of monopolistic broadcasting in Flanders. Regional language was used often for the sake of authenticity, which was an exception to the broadcasting policy of promoting the use of standard language. For this reason, there was a lot of controversy over the use of dialect, both among the broadcasting hierarchy and the press (Dhoest, 2003). The respondents mostly remembered the use of dialect, particularly in 'peasant dramas'. They also preferred the use of dialect, or at least they did not object to it.

One obvious reason explaining the preference for dialect is the fact that, for viewers of this generation, the use of dialect was self-evident in their own youth. Even the respondents now constituting a higher class remember growing up speaking dialect. Jan (69) remembered that a lot of dialect was heard in fiction at the time, but when asked if this bothered him, he replied:

> No, actually not. I think it may have bothered some people. But I come from very common people. Back then, dialect was usual, so it doesn't bother you much.

In terms of language politics, it is important to note that French was the language of culture and politics well into the 20th century. In daily use the Flemish language did not amount to much more than an amalgam of dialects, while the official Dutch standard language was little known. Only through education and broadcasting did Dutch become a standard fixture of daily life from the 1950s.

Another reason explaining the respondents' preference for dialect is the fact that they considered it more appropriate for some kinds of drama, in particular peasant dramas set in the past. As Thérèse (74) said: 'In dialect that sometimes sounds juicier', and Gerard (68) noted, 'That's their charm.' Referring to the prototypical period serial, Alfred (61) said:

> In *We, the Lords of Zichem*, dialect was used by the working-class boys, but that only gave the characters more power. Jo De Meyere, playing a young student, obviously uses standard language. The priest's maid used dialect, but that didn't bother me. That came across as very natural.

Standard Dutch, on the contrary, was often perceived as 'wooden' and artificial. In this context, it is important to note that the language standard was foreign as it was imported from the Netherlands, which caused resistance to, and the slow adoption of, standard Dutch. This explains several respondents' comments that dialect should be safeguarded, such as Odiel's (70) statement: 'I still like dialect, that's the culture of the community.' Dialect, rather than standard language, seemed to be perceived as a symbol of the Flemish nation. Most respondents explained their preference for dialect by referring to reality. As Raymonde (79) says: 'It was mostly dialect, because that's the way it was.' When asked why she preferred dialect, Jeanne (63) replied:

> Because that is as it really was, as the farmer used to be, cursing from time to time and using language as they used to do. A farmer didn't speak standard Dutch.

Marc (60) was equally positive:

> In certain series you would expect standard language, but in things like *We, the Lords of Zichem* the use of dialect didn't bother me . . . It would be downright unrealistic to have a simple farmer speak standard Dutch.

Clearly, realism – conceived as 'showing it as it was' – was a touchstone of quality and appreciation for the respondents. However, one can have certain reservations as to the actual realism of this drama. While the producers aimed to 'get it right' in representing the Flemish past, the ensuing period drama was not the 'window on the world' that the respondents considered it to be. The impression of realism may have been due as much to familiarity, not only with the codes of realism, but also with particular images of Flanders in period drama. Significantly, this representation fitted within a broader discourse initiated in the literature from which many serials drew, and was equally apparent in the cinema of the 1970s and 1980s (Mosley, 2001). This corresponds to Alice Hall's (2003) finding that viewer judgement of realism as 'factuality', the accurate representation of the real world, is based often on other media texts rather than personal experience. Therefore, viewers' assumption of correspondence to reality may be somewhat misguided, but it does remain significant in relation to

our thesis of national identification. Indeed, the unremitting references to reality indicate that viewers use fictional images to reflect on reality.

Recognition

The predominantly referential stance of viewers is supported further by the importance bestowed upon recognition as a criterion to judge domestic fiction. When asked if they thought Flemish fiction was recognizable, most of the respondents answered positively. More significantly, recognition was brought up spontaneously, although the term was used in different ways. Often, it referred to similarities to the world in which the respondents know and live. Thérèse (74) commented on the early success of *Skipper Near Mathilde*:

> Everybody liked that, because it was so real, it was so recognisable . . . Yes, I really like that. Everybody did, when *Skipper Near Mathilde* was on, the people next door asked if they could watch it here, because they didn't have a TV set at the time.

Later on, she specified this claim:

> It was a very common household, with a warm atmosphere. That was easy to recognise . . . Mathilde and her neighbour, they were often together, but they couldn't stand each other. I thought that was so recognisable, because you can also have that in the neighbourhood.

This kind of recognition was often combined with nostalgia, which explains the preference for recent history, coinciding with memories of one's youth. As Maria (87) commented on a period series: 'That was very good! A lot of things from our youth were in it, things we recognised.' At most, this recognition stretches to the world of the viewers' parents, familiar through oral tradition.

A more involved form of recognition implies recognition of the self, as in Jean's (70) words: 'You could recognise yourself in it.' For Jeanne (63), this kind of recognition was too strong:

> *We, the Lords of Zichem*, was that the one with the father who was always so angry that he . . . I couldn't watch that in the end because that's my own course of life, more or less. That really was like my life and I was always crying at it. He was always so brutal, that farmer Coene . . . It was a bit like my father. I also got beaten up.

Some viewers admitted that they recognized the image while not recognizing themselves in it. Guy (64) commented on the same serial:

> The recognition was limited in the sense that I couldn't recognise myself in the characters . . . I am a city boy, so I couldn't recognise myself in any of the characters. But recognition in the sense of: 'This is an aspect of Flanders that has really existed', more so.

Overall, most of the respondents recognized characters and situations from their own world, while some went further, claiming that they rec-ognized themselves – a very direct instance of identification indeed.

Again, as with realism, it is necessary to put these respondent responses into perspective. For one thing, some have reservations on the degree of recognition, at least of some series. Exaggeration is another point of criticism, as in Roger's comments (63):

> It was life as it was, perhaps with a slight exaggeration here and there. Certain things weren't really realist.

Moreover, while most of the respondents did answer the question regarding recognition positively, their hesitation suggests that they had never given this issue much thought. Godelieve (68) stated explicitly:

> I think I have never thought about that much. But now I think of it, I do think they showed it as it was.

Finally, it is important to note that the recognition of the specific representation of Flanders is partly due to its constant repetition on TV and in other media. Jan (63) said that a serial like *We, the Lords of Zichem* was recognizable because people had read one of the books that it was based on, and had seen the film adaptation:

> These series were recognisable, particularly the big ones like *The Lords of Zichem*, if you had read the book *De Witte*. And there had been some movies. That was recognisable: the village priest, the presbytery, the situations in the café . . . That was all idealised, but people could recognise it.

However, these reservations do not detract from the potential impact of these images on the formation of national images. The fact that TV images of Flanders, although selective and strongly codified, were perceived as realist and recognizable suggests that the respondents effectively appropriated them. They were not 'wrong' in describing these series as realist and recognizable, but they did consistently foreground certain aspects in their responses, which testifies to the discursive and productive nature of such memory-interviews.

'Flemishness'

The respondents rarely referred spontaneously to 'national identity', which confirms our reservations about explicitly addressing it in the interviews. However, many other responses are relevant in this respect. First, most of the respondents stated a clear preference for domestic drama over imported fiction. As mentioned earlier, this is a pattern found internationally and often ascribed to recognition and cultural proximity. The respondents confirmed this view, referring to language, culture and history as reasons for preferring Flemish fiction. Thus, André (83) stated:

> I think it appealed more to us, because it was more about our own life, we could recognise ourselves much more in it. Not to forget the intelligibility, the language. We understand French quite well, but the pronunciation is often not very clear. In this respect a series in Dutch is much easier, because we can understand everything without a problem. We thought Flemish series were better and they interested us more.

A second moment when the importance of 'Flemishness' became apparent was when the respondents were asked whether the serial fiction they remembered gave a good image of Flanders. The rationale for this question was that serial drama gave a very one-sided representation (Dhoest, 2003). However, a large majority of the respondents were very happy with the television portrayal of Flanders, which is in line with the observations given previously on realism and recognition. In this context, they mostly referred to the popular period serials showing the life of the common Flemings in the early 20th century. For example, Frida (71) commented that these serials gave a good image of village life: 'It really evoked the atmosphere as it was in a village.' Cecile (73) thought that the harshness of life in the countryside was well represented:

> Perhaps some things were different, in the past. But to give only one example: farmers' lives were very hard in the past, it is good that they show that.

The reason why they liked these images was often related to personal life, as is apparent in this response from Urbain (71):

> We are so lucky – or unlucky – to have lived that, in reality . . . We went to school and to church in clogs. We had to take them off in church, leave them behind and walk in our socks. Life was poor, there was no luxury, we had to make do with what we had. Every day we ate soup, potatoes, bacon . . . That's how I was brought up. Everything was mended . . . It makes me think of my time.

Another reason why the respondents liked period serials is that it taught them something about the Flemish past. As Alfred (61) said:

> You have a supposition of how things were in the past, but nothing more. Those serials helped you to imagine that period.

The viewers commented positively on the possibility of bringing back memories of their own youth, and of learning about the period before that. Cecile (73) said:

> I liked that, those are memories from our youth that are refreshed. Maybe the young nowadays say: 'That's old-fashioned,' but I think, if the old don't tell that anymore . . . It is written in the books, but I think those stories may be told.

Some even complained that there was too little period drama, which shows the strong commitment to this genre. Generally, most of the respondents stated a clear preference for historical drama over contemporary

fiction. As mentioned previously, they were particularly critical of the current fiction offered (which hardly contains period drama). As Jan (71) said about period serials: 'Let them rebroadcast that, it was better than the rubbish they broadcast now!' This preference for period drama is not expressed only by contrasting it with the present. As Angeline (69) said:

> I prefer historical serials, because they contain more life content, more character, more feeling . . . The mentality of those people.

The underlying criterion, again, is realism and recognition of the picture of Flanders, which suggests that Flemishness is an important factor in viewer memories, at least implicitly.

At the end of the interviews, the respondents were asked explicitly whether they thought that the serials of which they had such fond memories were 'typically Flemish'. There was some hesitation in their answers, suggesting the respondents had not given the issue much thought previously. However, most answered positively, motivating their response in different ways. Pol (60) situates 'Flemishness' in the language, setting and issues:

> First by the language, and the environment it was set in, and the language that was typically Flemish. I mean, the story was linked to the setting, to the region it was set in . . . The same story would look very different in an American series, or in a British one, or in a French one – and in that sense it is typically Flemish. Because you see very strong accents of a Flemish . . . of images from our community, actually.

Louis (70) referred to the sources of period drama: 'Of course, many of these serials were based on typically Flemish authors.' A recurring criterion, once again, is realism, as in Cecile's (73) words: 'That's how people lived here before.' Marc (60) linked realism to the portrayal of the Flemish character:

> I think it's good to rub people's noses in reality and to show the less beautiful sides of life . . . It fitted with the little sides of people. These can also be shown. Perhaps we are a bit conservative and closed.

By way of explanation as to why they thought the fiction was typically Flemish, some referred to their identification with Flanders, such as Roger (67): 'Because I am Flemish.'

The importance of Flemishness is one point of correspondence with press comments. While reviewers were critical of the overall quality of domestic fiction, and preferred 'serious' drama over popular comedy, they also thought that it was recognizable and realist. What saved the day, in their eyes, was the strong national character of domestic fiction, its 'Flemishness' (Dhoest, 2004b). However, a major difference concerns the respondents' overwhelmingly positive memories. For example, they did not agree with press criticism that there was too much period drama at the

time. Moreover, they did not think that serial drama gave a cliché-ridden image of the past, another point of criticism raised by the press.

Conclusion

This research began by asking how television fiction effectively operates in the formation of national identities. Reviewing the evidence found in the interviews, some answers can be given while some reservations have to be made. First, it is clear that television in Flanders created a national community of viewers, at least in the period of monopolistic broadcasting. There were hardly any alternatives, and public broadcasting deliberately aimed to unite the national viewership. Few fiction programmes explicitly addressed the nation or national identity, but the Flemish respondents preferred, and to a great extent watched, domestic fiction, which was aimed at making them familiar with Flemish culture. In the interviews, they stress realism, recognition and (implicitly) 'Flemishness' as the reasons why they liked domestic serials, which is in line with press criticism. Analysis of the interviews shows strong discursive patterns and recurrences, with respondents stating that they liked the same serials (mostly popular historical serials) for the same reasons. The centrality of period drama in their memories reflects the dominance of this genre in terms of output, but it also points to its symbolic centrality. As opposed to more internationally-defined genres such as soaps or sitcoms, period drama is very much perceived as one's 'own'. This is not surprising, as it is a genre that often aims to represent the national past.

This is further supported by the consistencies in the responses across gender and class, two factors commonly found to strongly affect viewing behaviour and preferences. The differences in the interviews do not correlate systematically with gender, which suggests that domestic period drama is a less gendered category, as opposed to 'feminine' soaps or 'male' crime dramas. As to class, the respondents' positive memories (currently) belonging to the higher classes in terms of education and occupation have been noted already. This is surprising, as looking down upon popular viewing fare could be a way to distinguish oneself and to situate oneself in the intellectual élite – as often seemed to be the case in press reviews. While some of the respondents echoed the condescension towards contemporary popular drama (particularly soaps), very few looked down upon the 'folk' period dramas. This suggests that these serials, although looked down upon by the cultural élite at the time of broadcasting, have changed from a 'bad' to a 'good' cultural object – which, indeed, they may always have been for a majority of viewers. This finding also further corroborates their power in uniting a (national) audience.

As mentioned previously, most of the respondents took a referential rather than critical stance, neglecting the constructed nature of the representations and focusing on their reality value. Only some seemed to be

aware of – or at least, cared about – the negative press surrounding these serials, so their opinion appeared to be little affected by the 'official' critical discourse. On the contrary, it seems that despite their negative comments, the press critics have taken a cue from 'common' viewers in explaining the success of domestic drama by referring to its quintessential 'Flemishness'. The portrayal of the Flemish past is what ultimately salvages these serials in reviewers' eyes , the same quality which seems to explain viewers' preferences.

While nostalgia coloured the respondents' positive memories, it does not detract from their central position in cultural imagination. Indeed, one may argue that nostalgia forms the very core of national identities, which commonly display a strong orientation towards an idealized shared history. As viewers most fondly remember popular period serials, a dual nostalgia is operating: nostalgic memories for fiction that was itself nostalgically representing the shared past. At least for this generation, these serials have become part of collective memory, leading to the creation of a national 'mnemonic' community. This is not to claim the predominance of domestic fiction in the construction of national identity, but to redress the balance and include such everyday, popular forms of culture alongside the more commonly considered 'official' (political, high cultural) discourses on the nation. This calls for a revaluation of these series, which have been unduly criticized in the past.

Finally, these findings also call for further international comparisons into similar forms of 'banal' nationalism, particularly in small (European) 'national' regions (or 'stateless nations') within larger nation-states. Billig (1995) mostly situates banal nationalism in established nations, as opposed to the 'hot' nationalism of peripheral groups seeking to establish a new nation. As noted by Law (2001: 300), such analysis does not translate straightforwardly to 'stateless nations'. While Flanders clearly belongs to the latter category, there too, beside political 'hot' nationalism and explicit high cultural nationalism (celebrating national cultural feats), there is an undercurrent of unnoticed, everyday 'flagging' of the nation. This happens both within television fiction, in the creation of a commonsensical discourse through representations of the nation, and among the viewers, who first form a community of viewers and then a mnemonic community remembering shared viewing experiences.

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Notes

1. For a good summary of the 'heritage' debate, see Monk (2002).

2. These are more fully analysed in Dhoest (2005, 2006).
3. The interview transcripts are literal translations by the author. To secure anonymity, only the respondents' first names are given.

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Biographical note

Alexander Dhoest is Lecturer in Popular and Media Culture at the Department of Communication Studies, Antwerp University. His doctoral research dealt with the construction of national identity in Flemish television drama (textually, but also in production and critical reception). In his current research he is further developing the historical and contemporary reception of domestic TV drama. He has published two books on television culture, and is currently editing a collection on the history of Flemish television. ADDRESS: Department of Communication Studies, University of Antwerp, Sint-Jacobstraat 2, B-2000 Antwerp, Belgium. [email: alexander.dhoest@ua.ac.be]