1. National television in a global era

From its start, European television was organized and regulated on the level of nation states, who sought to control the new medium, which they deemed important to support – but also to form – the nation as 'one people' (de Leeuw et al. 2008). Television was instrumental in uniting citizens into one 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991), creating unprecedented moments of simultaneously shared experiences, both exceptional media events such as royal coronations or weddings (Dayan and Katz 1992) and everyday programmes such as daily news broadcasts, soaps and game shows (e.g. Cardiff and Scannell 1987; Bourdon 1992; Scannell 1996). If we view national identities as constructions in which representation plays a crucial role, television is clearly a powerful source of representations of national unity (Hall 1992). European public broadcasting was the prime model in this respect, but in an era of limited competition – Ellis (2000) calls it the 'era of scarcity' – commercial broadcasters could equally create imagined communities. While never truly encompassing the whole nation or completely erasing all internal differences, broadcast television in its first decades was probably the closest we ever got to actual 'imagined communities' of media users.

But, so the argument goes, over the years all kinds of changes have diminished this uniting force. Shifts from public broadcasting monopolies to duopolies and ever more open national broadcasting markets have fragmented audiences in the ages of 'availability' and 'plenty' (Ellis 2000). Local, regional, international and 'global' channels create alternative geographical delimitations of audiences, while specialized and niche channels divide the market in other, age-, gender- and lifestyle-related segments. In the age of flexible 'matrix media' (Curtin 2009), transnational players dominate the commercial broadcasting market, which is increasingly governed by international regulation. Technological changes – from antenna to cable and satellite reception, from analogue to digital signals – offer consumers ever increasing possibilities and choices, in the process further eroding the sense of a nationwide, shared viewing experience. Programmes and formats travel in ever expanding circles, creating a 'global' television marketplace (Moran 1998).

'Globalization' has been one of the buzzwords of media studies in the past decades. The increasing border-crossing has led some to predict the 'end of nations', while others are tempted to announce the 'death of national television'. However, many have subsequently questioned such statements, qualifying the claims of globalization theory and observing the persistence of both the national and national television. Contrary to early beliefs, globalization does not simply imply homogenization as there is a constant tension with powers of heterogenization (Sreberny-Mohammadi et al. 1997). The local does remain important and the global and the local are considered as 'mutually constitutive' (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1996). Globalization is now perceived as going hand in hand with heterogenization and the creation of hybrid 'glocal' forms of the global (Kraidy 2005). Cultural identities are not one-sidedly based on the national anymore, as other layers – global, regional, local – now simultaneously form part of complex, postmodern identities (Barker 1999; Sinclair 2004).

In this context, the nation does remain an important economic, political and socio-cultural entity mediating globalization (Sinclair 2004). Nations keep on providing social cohesion and references to shared memories and ethnic links, creating symbolical borders between 'self' and others (Smith 1990) – albeit sometimes in a defensive, counter-globalist way (Hall 1992; Featherstone 2003). Moreover, despite the general increase of mobility and border-crossing, a large proportion of the world population never leaves the confines of their nation (Golding 2005), which cautions against assumptions of a 'generalized nomadology' (Morley 2004). A powerful notion to describe the persistent omnipresence and self-evidence of nations is Billig's 'banal nationalism', pointing at the continuous, largely unnoticed everyday references to and confirmations of the national (Billig 1995).

Together with the nation, national TV may have lost its self-evidence as TV signals, companies, programmes and formats readily cross national borders, but it has not become obsolete. This is confirmed, for instance, in comparative research, which discloses strong national differences in media content and organization and, in the process, illustrates the persistently national organization of social life (Sreberny 2004). According to Waisbord (2004), national identity remains a central form of cultural identity, which finds everyday confirmation in the media making available cultural forms identified with the nation, providing opportunities for shared media experiences and institutionalizing national cultures. Despite external (globalization) and internal (multiculturalism, hybridization) challenges, media still bring together the members of the nation around language, symbols and common experiences in an everyday context (Waisbord 2004). Mass media like television continue to provide a sense of 'home' and community, which should not automatically be regarded as reactionary or essentialist (Morley 2004). As pointed out by Turner (2009), television remains embedded in the patterns of everyday life and there is a continuing sense of the 'co-presence' of the national audience. Moreover, the 'global' questioning of the national organization of TV is mostly a Western matter, while television firmly remains national in other regions and countries such as China (Turner 2009).

The above argument does not deny the importance of globalization, nor does it claim that the national should remain the prime prism through which to study television. Indeed, we can question the limited attention to transnational collaborations and exchanges (Mihelj 2007) as well as the predominance of the Eurocentrist notion of the modern nation state in international media studies (McMillin 2007). Rather, in the face of dramatic changes leading to statements about the post-national nature of television, this paper aims to redress the balance by pointing at continuities within these changes. It wants to demonstrate that the national does remain important, not only at the level of television production and its institutional organization, but also in programmes and their reception.

Starting with programmes, until today diverse genres – fiction and non-fiction, information and entertainment – bear the mark of their national context and play a role in its discursive construction (Castelló, Dhoest and O'Donnell 2009). For instance, the predominance and pre-eminence of national over international news is well-known. News programmes also constitute discourses about the nation (Frosh and Wolfsfeld 2006), framing the news in nationally specific ways (Hall 2000). Fiction, too, is a programme category that is still closely linked to nationality, particularly in Europe where the strong import of American fiction has led to a focus on the own culture in domestic fiction (Newcomb 1997).[1] This leads to an important and growing output, fuelled by the audience preference for such fare (which will be addressed below). Soaps, in particular, are often considered as representations of 'ordinary', everyday life in the nation (Turner 2005; O'Donnell 1999), complementing universal conventions with 'local' elements such as stars, settings and iconography (Moran 1998), accents and locations (Moran 2000), landscapes and lifestyles (Dunleavy 2005), (minority) languages and cultural assumptions (Franco 2001; O'Donnell 2001), and cultural values (Kreutzner and Seiter 1991). More generally, TV fiction can be used as an instrument in the construction of national images through references to national culture, history, language and national types (Dhoest 2004), and more broadly by showcasing national symbols, territory, institutions, religion, folklore, gastronomy, sports, etc. (Castelló 2007).

Entertainment television, too, may bear the marks of its national context of production. Contrary to fiction where the worldwide American presence is important, the majority of entertainment programming is nationally produced both in the US and abroad. As noted by Bonner (2003), 'ordinary television' – often unnoticed, lightweight entertainment programmes such as game shows, talk shows and food programmes – are generally 'local' and show everyday life in the nation. Even when entertainment programmes are based on international formats, as is often the case in reality TV, national elements are added in a process of customization or 'indigenization' (Moran 2009). Franco (2008) distinguishes local casts, programme titles, visual styles, and gender and class politics as 'national' ingredients, while Aslama and Pantti (2007) consider media rituals, settings, themes and communicative conventions, which are sometimes included in a calculated and intentional way, but also often in a banal, taken-for-granted way. Similarly, even adaptations of strongly scripted formats like *The Weakest Link* may contain numerous banal references to the nation, often bringing the questions 'home' to the nation (Van den Bulck and Sinardet 2005; see also Moran 1998).

2. National viewing

Moving from programmes to their viewers, there are many indications that viewers have a stronger connection with national TV and domestic programming than with imported programmes, as the discussion below will illustrate. As mentioned above, in the early years nationally organized broadcasting often had the explicit aim to unite the viewers in front of their screens. Even after the age of monopolistic public broadcasting and its explicit policies of nation-making, broadcasting can contribute to the construction of an imagined community of the nation as a symbolic home:

> It can link the peripheral to the centre; turn previously exclusive social events into mass experiences; and, above all, penetrate the domestic sphere by linking the national public into the private lives of its citizens through the creation of both sacred and quotidian moments of national communion(Morley 2004: 312).

As many have noted, this has become less self-evident over the past decades, as:

> [I]nternally differentiated, customized, interactive, and individuated audience segments would make their own choices, would increasingly act as producers as well as consumers of mediated meanings, and would identify less with nation-states and more with constituencies of taste and affiliation that were local and international at once (Hartley 2004: 23).

However, audience figures show that viewers still tune in massively to watch at least some programmes and media events, and that the age of television audiences as collectivities is not quite over yet (Schulz 2000).

It is clear that viewers have a special bond with their 'own' programmes, especially fiction. Domestic fiction is generally more successful than imported fiction, which led to a growth of domestic production in most European countries from the 1990s (Buonanno 1998). The appeal of domestic fiction is mostly linked to the sense of recognition it evokes among audiences: 'People expect and are pleased to recognise themselves, their own social, individual and collective world, their customs and lifestyles, accents, faces, landscapes and everything else that they

perceive as close and familiar' (Buonanno 2008: 96; see also Paterson 1997). The term most used to describe this close bond is 'cultural proximity', developed by Joseph Straubhaar (1991) to explain the preference for national or regional programmes that are closer to one's own culture. In more recent work, Straubhaar (2007) argues that even in the age of globalization, local, national and regional proximities dominate the consumption of television. National cultures, markets and television networks still dominate the viewing of most audiences, sometimes supplanted by smaller (local, sub-national) or larger (geo-cultural regions) entities. The international predominance of American fiction is particularly clear on younger or poorer (often commercial) channels, while established (particularly public) stations prefer to broadcast as much domestic fiction as possible.

According to Straubhaar (2007), language is the strongest marker of cultural proximity, as it entails shared cultural capital and references. This explains the importance of (geo-) linguistic regional markets for television, for instance in Latin America. However, cultural 'closeness' does not completely predict television viewing as there are other sources of proximity, such as genre proximity, thematic proximity and value proximity. This implies that even programmes from other cultures may have a high degree of 'cultural shareability' and therefore be popular abroad (Straubhaar 2007). They may have a limited degree of 'cultural discount', the term coined by Hoskins and Mirus (1989) to refer to the diminished appeal of programmes in a different culture. This is particularly true of American TV fiction as it is produced for a large and (ethnically) diverse market and worldwide audiences are very familiar with its codes, also through Hollywood cinema (Buonanno 2008). American fiction, therefore, is often a close second in terms of audience preferences in Europe, after domestic programming but before fiction from other European countries (Silj 1988).

In empirical studies on the appeal of domestic fiction, mostly qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and focus groups are used. For instance, Moran (1998) asked German viewers what they considered as 'national' in a German soap. He found that this was seldom explicit, national elements mostly appearing in the everyday lives of characters in an unexceptional and taken for granted way – reminiscent of banal nationalism. The familiarity of German actors, the language used and some national character traits such as intolerance and small-mindedness were identified as 'German', but generally it was not very clear to respondents why they considered these soaps to be German. Similarly,

Dhoest (2009) interviewed emerging adult viewers about Flemish fiction, and they also considered it to be 'typically Flemish' but could not quite pinpoint why that was, most of them mentioning the recognizable and quite realistic portrayal of everyday life and ordinary people. While the national character of their domestic fiction may not be very clear to many non-American viewers, it is generally linked to 'realism' and contrasted to imported, particularly American programmes. For instance, Griffiths (1996) observed an appreciation of realism among young viewers of a Welsh soap, which was contrasted with other 'more American' programming. Similarly, in a study on British viewers, Livingstone (1988) found a stress on escapism as a reason to watch American programmes as opposed to realism in British soaps. Strelitz (2002) found references to realism as a reason to watch local drama among black South African students, who thought it connected more with their lived reality. Finally, in a study of Flemish viewers, Biltereyst (1991) found a stronger involvement in Flemish fiction, which was more often related to the viewers' own lives than American fiction. All the studies above illustrate a strong 'referential' involvement with domestic fiction, which is more often connected to 'real life' (see Liebes and Katz 1990).

3. The Flemish case

In the last part of this paper, I will investigate these matters in the Flemish context. Flanders is the Dutch-speaking community in Belgium, a region with about 6 million inhabitants in a country of about 10.5 million. Belgium is a federalized state, with three cultural communities (Dutch, French and German) of which the Dutch-speaking Flemish is the largest and the one with the strongest nationalist aspirations. It is not a nation state, but a sub-national community that closely fits the characteristics of national cultures as described above. Indeed, as noted by O'Donnell (1999), in some cases regions may be the best level on which to study national cultural identity in television. From the very start, Belgian television was organized on the level of these regions, the Flemish monopolistic public broadcaster in particular having strong culturally nationalist aspirations (Van den Bulck 2001; Dhoest and Van den Bulck 2007). In different genres, notably fiction, the broadcasters aimed to stimulate Flemish culture and to create a community of Flemish viewers (Dhoest 2004). With the liberalization of the broadcasting market and the start of commercial broadcasting in 1989, this cultural logic of broadcasting was adapted to the more competitive context, but it did not disappear. After some years of market dominance by commercial channel VTM, from the mid-1990s the renewed public broadcasting VRT regained its audience and in 2002 it even became the market leader again.

Like its commercial competitor VMMa (Vlaamse Media Maatschappij – Flemish Media Company), public broadcaster VRT (Vlaamse Radio en Televisie

– Flemish Radio and Television) refers to Flanders both in its name and in its programmes. Domestic productions across all genres are the core of programming on both generalist channels, the public Eén and the commercial VTM. Indeed, as predicted and as observed across Europe, the liberalization of the market led to the growing influx and relative dominance of American fiction productions (71% of all European imports in 1997; Brants and De Bens 2000). However, this should be put in perspective, as American productions are mostly scheduled outside prime time and on commercial channels (De Bens and de Smaele 2000). Moreover, despite the small relative weight of Flemish fiction in the totality of the schedules, there is an important increase of domestic productions in absolute terms, which is hidden by the expansion of daytime broadcasting time: more Flemish fiction is made, but even more American fiction is imported. Focusing only on prime time, the rise of Flemish fiction becomes clear (De Bens 2000).

Looking at the figures for the 2009-2010 season, and breaking these down further between main and secondary channels, the importance of domestic fiction is even clearer. On the first public channel Eén, of the total 323 hours of serial fiction broadcast in prime time 64.9% is Flemish while only 2.2% is American. Most domestic fiction is scheduled on the first channel, the second public channel Canvas mostly scheduling British drama, beside the repeats of one old Flemish series (1.8%) in summer and 19.6% of American drama. For the prime commercial channel VTM fiction is even more important, with a total of 468 hours broadcast in prime time, 69.7% of which is Flemish and 15.3% American. On the second youth-oriented commercial channel 2Be, however, all serial fiction is American.[2] This clearly illustrates the secondary position of American fiction, which is most prominent on smaller commercial channels oriented towards younger viewers.

While Flemish viewers can now choose between tens of channels, over half of the population tunes in daily to the two main Flemish channels, the public Eén (market share of 32.4% in 2009) and the commercial VTM (20.9% in 2009; VRT 2009). It is ironic that the market mechanism that was expected to destroy domestic fiction production actually saved it. In a market that is more than ever oriented towards consumer tastes, domestic programming proved to be most popular. Even if expensive (particularly in a small market like Flanders), domestic fiction has proved to be a good investment, as it is consistently more popular with audiences than any imported fiction, despite its often limited production values. Similarly, if reality television has invaded both public and commercial channels, only domestic programmes or adaptations do well with national audiences. To illustrate: in 2009, the list of top 10 programmes contains no imported programmes and five out of the 10 top places are occupied by domestic fiction productions. As in the preceding years, the top 100 is all Flemish, apart from eight imported programmes: three documentary series, one British mini-series, two American movies and two Dutch series (source: CIM, http://www.cim.be/). Considering the average ratings in prime time for the 2009-2010 season, it is clear that domestic fiction scores best: on the first public channel Eén it reaches average ratings of 31.1% and on VTM 23.8%, as compared to the 11.5% of American fiction on Eén, 14.2% on VTM and 3.5% on the smaller channel 2Be.[3]

The general viewer preference for domestic fiction in Flanders is clear and

can, in broad terms, be explained through the concept of cultural proximity. As mentioned above, the Flemish top 100 for 2009 also includes two Dutch programmes, the police series *Baantjer* and law series *Keyzer & De Boer, advocaten*. Flanders shares a language and a border with the Netherlands, so one could expect the cultural proximity between both regions to be very high. While the Flemish ratings for the more popular Dutch channels were indeed high in the age of monopolistic public broadcasting (with a market share as high as 25% in 1988), since the start of VTM these have dramatically dropped to about 4% in 2006 (Bauwens 2007). The offer of Dutch programmes on Flemish channels is also limited, which questions, or at least qualifies, the model of cultural proximity, as the import of American fiction is much higher. However, Dutch fiction is quite popular, scoring somewhere between Flemish and American fiction. On Eén, it gets average ratings of 19.7% (as opposed to 31.1% for Flemish fiction and 11.5% for US fiction), on VTM 17.1% (as opposed to 23.8% for Flemish and 14.2% for US fiction).

The lower popularity of Dutch fiction in comparison to Flemish fiction indicates a degree of cultural discount. Indeed, despite the shared language, there is some cultural distance between Flanders and the Netherlands, which is mostly attributed to historical and religious differences (Droste 1993; Hofstede 1991). Moreover, the shared language is pronounced in a different way, which also creates some distance (which is often bridged through subtitling). In comparison, American fiction scores quite well. As noted above, throughout Europe American television is often a close second in terms of popularity, after domestic television but before other (European) fiction. According to Buonanno (2008: 97), there is a process of 'anticipatory socialization' at work, which, through Hollywood cinema, makes viewers extremely familiar with American fiction. Even the linguistic 'discount' is limited as Flemish viewers are familiar with English-language pronunciation because programmes are subtitled, not dubbed. Research among younger viewers (Dhoest 2009) actually shows that they often find English more 'natural' in fiction than Dutch.

Overall, the model of cultural proximity seems to retain its explanatory power: domestic fiction is most popular. One could argue that viewers do not have many options, as the main channels schedule a majority of domestic fiction in prime time, but this is beside the point as there are many imported alternative options on other channels, which are simply less popular. Moreover, domestic fiction gets such a prominent position in the schedules of the major channels because it is more popular compared to imported fiction scheduled in exactly the same time slot (which is often the case with Dutch series, filling the gap between two seasons of a Flemish show), so their popularity is not just the product of their advantageous position in the schedules. Domestic fiction is also not forced upon viewers through Flemish nationalist broadcasting policies. While this kind of 'culturally nationalist' production policy was present in the monopoly years of public broadcasting, and while the public broadcaster and its legislator (the Flemish government) still value the 'Flemishness' of programmes, viewer popularity is now the prime rationale for fiction production. There are no quotas or specific funding to stimulate domestic fiction production, only 'quality drama'

getting some financial aid. From an industry point of view, domestic fiction is important predominantly because it is so popular.

Further unravelling the workings of cultural proximity, it is important to note that the popularity of domestic fiction is not limited to particular genres. Flemish soaps are massively more popular than imported soaps, which is not surprising for they are often described as representations of everyday life in the nation, as discussed above (see also Dhoest 2007a). Similarly, Flemish sitcoms are generally more popular than imported (British or American) ones, even if they are often less well-scripted and acted. Of course, this success could be linked to the cultural specificity and linguistic basis of humour, which remains firmly attached to its national context. Finally, Flemish crime drama is also more popular, which is particularly interesting as this is a relatively expensive genre where the differences with imported (British and American) fiction in terms of production values are significant. Despite the lower visual appeal and the absence of spectacular action scenes, viewers prefer the Flemish shows. Because of budget limitations these focus more on characterization and dialogue than on action, which seems to work well as this adds to the 'everyday' nature of Flemish crime drama. Like Flemish soaps and sitcoms, rather than providing escape and spectacle, Flemish crime and police drama remains close to the reality of ordinary life.

This 'everday' character of the most popular TV fiction genres in Flanders is an important aspect of its viewer appeal. This is confirmed in viewer research, which shows a strong tendency for viewers to compare fiction with their own world, as mentioned in the theoretical framework. Throughout my research based on interviews with viewers, the dominant tendency is for viewers to judge Flemish fiction on its degree of realism, to compare it to (their own) reality and to comment on the level of recognition it evokes (Dhoest 2007b). Even younger viewers, who tend to think American fiction is more entertaining, do think Flemish fiction is more realistic and recognizable (Dhoest 2009).

Linking this preference for domestic drama to 'national' culture, we have to be careful not to overstress our point. There is nothing explicitly nationalist about this fiction; neither does it overtly support Flemish nationalism or separatism. However, as there is no French-language drama on Flemish television and there are hardly any institutional bonds between Flemish and French-language Belgian television, Flanders clearly is the relevant level for the analysis of fiction. It also seems justified to consider this level as (sub)national rather than just 'cultural', as television is produced and consumed within the geographical borders of the Flemish region, only some programmes crossing the borders to the Netherlands. This fiction is a perfect illustration of 'banal' nationalism, taken for granted and practically invisible references to everyday life in Flanders. Familiar cities, actors, dress styles and accents all add to a local feel and strengthen the bond with the viewers. While this fiction does not explicitly refer to Flanders, it creates a cluster of shared cultural symbols and images, thus both feeding into and contributing to a sense of Flemish identification among the viewers.

4. Conclusion

Rather than 'ending', television seems to be reinventing itself. While it has shed its old appearance of a uniform, self-imposed national institution, it still retains a lot of its uniting power. Based on cultural and linguistic bonds, nations remain the strongest entities in the market of television production and reception. For all the global transport of formats and programmes, it is within such geographically circumscribed regions that television primarily operates. Even 'global' television is mostly watched on domestic channels, dubbed or subtitled in the 'own' language, part of a national flow of programmes, framed by familiar presenters. This is certainly true in the Flemish case, which presents plenty of evidence that viewers remain faithful to domestic programming. While the opportunities for viewer selectivity have been growing over the past decades, the fragmentation of the market has never been quite as radical as predicted. Across the board, the preference for domestic or indigenized programming is striking. Therefore, reviewing the empirical evidence, it seems that claims about the 'end of national TV' are exaggerated.

However, a note of caution is necessary. The argument made above, or at least its strength, may be specific to the Flemish context – which, incidentally, would support the persistent importance of the national framework for television viewing. On the one hand, in such a small market, generalist channels aimed at the entire population have the best chance of surviving and they focus on national programming to attract a large cross-section of the population. On the other hand, Flanders is the equivalent of a region, sub-nation or stateless nation in other countries, and perhaps the argument developed above mostly holds true for this kind of culturally and linguistically (more or less) coherent regions. Moreover, Flanders has more than average national aspirations, which may explain the strong commitment to 'own' programmes – which, again, may not be typical.

To confirm these suspicions, it would be useful to do more comparative research, which could give us a clearer view on what is nationally specific about television systems, programmes and uses. For one, international comparative research may help to question the often universalizing claims inherent in much television theory and research, and the implied generalization from the British and American situation (McMillin 2007). Comparative research may even question the persistent use of 'the national' as a theoretical and research framework, but for the time being I would argue that it is still very useful and valid.

While further theoretical reflection on the 'national' character of television in the age of globalization and digitization is needed, hopefully the above account has also illustrated how an empirical 'reality check' may be useful to distinguish the possible from the actual state of television. We should not only look at what is new and exciting, but also at what is stable and widespread, possibly more conservative and therefore less appealing in television use. Although television now more than ever allows the transgression of national borders and individual choices, for many viewers it remains a safe haven of shared, familiar programmes, close to home.

Notes

1. 'Domestic fiction' is defined here as fiction produced in the country where it is broadcast.
2. Own calculations based on data provided by the VRT Research Department. The period covered is 1 September 2009-31 August 2010. All serial fiction (above 1 episode) starting between 7 and 11 PM is included, including repeats. Special thanks to Jo Martens from the research department for the rich data.
3. Own calculations based on data provided by the VRT Research Department.

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