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TELEVISION AS A PROJECT

The relation between public service broadcasting and Italian historical cultures
(1954-1994)

Abstract

In his recent book, Jerome Bourdon has clearly showed that the ideal type of the “public service” is underlain by different conceptions, perspectives and visions. To understand how this concept, and more generally the “idea of television”, manifests itself in Italy, it is essential to start from the cultures that have a vision of “public service”, and of television itself, and that seek to turn this vision into something concrete. Looking at the first four decades of Italian television history, we can identify two driving forces, that also offer two ways to interpret and relate to the television medium. I refer to them as “control” and “project”. “Control” (control over television) is a continuous attitude that permeates the historical cultures in their approach to television. By “project”, I mean the development of a vision that is broader and richer than the simple concern for “control” but that shares with it the need to “channel” the explosive power of TV to reflect ideal or “ideological” needs, in line with the cultures that these projects have articulated. The essay looks at the period from the 1950s (with the advent of television) to the late 80s and early 90s, pointing out how the different historical cultures have tried both to exert influence and control and to develop specific projects on television.

Keywords

Television history; cultural history; public service broadcasting; TV and politics.

1. TELEVISION, NATIONAL CULTURES AND POLITICAL PARTIES

In a recent book containing a valuable comparative discussion on the history of television in various European countries, Jérôme Bourdon has shown very clearly how the generic ideal type of European-style “public-service broadcasting” is actually underlain by conceptions, perspectives and visions that differ somewhat according to the period and the sociocultural environment in which they were formulated¹.

To understand how the public television service took shape and evolved in Italy, it is crucial to analyze the medium’s relationship with the historical national cultures that attempted to “mould” the small-screen world, to transform an ideal vision into a concrete television enterprise over several decades, starting from the Fifties.

Indeed, one of the most important features of Italian television history is the constant attention that it has received in public and intellectual debate. This debate had a

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¹ J. Bourdon, *Du Service public à la télé-réalité. Une Histoire culturelle des télévisions européennes, 1950-2010*, Paris: INA, 2011.

real impact on how television developed. In the US, broadcasting has always been a commercial business focused primarily on entertainment; in Italy, however, the public-service broadcasting firmly followed the British model and the BBC's Reithian motto of "educating, informing and entertaining", while also being deeply rooted in Italy's post-WW2 historical, cultural and political milieu².

After the war, the main parties in the Republican parliament articulated not only different political viewpoints but also alternative cultural and ideological visions. When regular television broadcasts began, in 1954, the Christian Democrats (DC), the main party of government, started to exercise a direct and growing influence on the RAI by appointing its top managers. Broadcasting, a legally sanctioned state monopoly, thus fell under direct government control and, hence, under the direct influence of the Catholic-inspired DC. This situation would significantly change only twenty years later, when the RAI reform (law no. 103 of 1975) shifted control of public-service broadcasting from government to parliament, by establishing a specific parliamentary commission ("*Commissione parlamentare per l'indirizzo generale e la vigilanza dei servizi radio-televisivi*"), which appointed the TV company's management board. The years after the reform saw the other parliamentary parties increasingly involved in RAI governance, especially the two main left-of-centre parties: the Italian socialist party (PSI), which was in government with the DC from the early Sixties, and the Italian communist party (PCI), historically an opposition force.

The national political parties represented the values and ideology of rather different cultural traditions – the Catholics, the socialist/communist left, and the minority liberal/laic tradition – which informed their equally different ways of conceiving the cultural industry, the media and, in particular, television³. As Umberto Eco has noted, in its formative years in the Fifties and Sixties, TV became a battleground between two opposing intellectual factions: the "apocalyptic" – primarily from the political left – who demonized the new medium as an instrument of standardizing and dumbing down, and the "integrated", who saw television as an opportunity for spreading and popularizing knowledge and for redefining intellectual work itself⁴. Both groups agreed, though, that the small screen was a remarkable innovation and a force for social and cultural change. Everyone to varying degrees concurred – as Aldo Grasso summed up in his *Storia della televisione* – that "television marks a *terminus post quem* [...], a new era, a watershed"⁵.

Italian intellectuals looked at the new medium from a position of what can be described as superiority. Indeed, they were convinced they had the tools to understand and, in a manner of speaking, "master" – through theory and knowledge, if not always in practice – that novelty that was gradually but decisively seeping into the homes, habits and everyday lives of Italians of all economic backgrounds, from the heart of the working class to the bourgeoisie.

On one hand, the left-leaning intellectuals, the "critics" who espoused the twentieth-century development of Marxist theory by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer⁶, exhibited a pessimistic detachment from the modern cultural industry, from mass society,

² A. Grasso, *Storia della televisione italiana*, Milano: Garzanti, 1992; F. Monteleone, *Storia della radio e della televisione in Italia*, Venezia: Marsilio, 1992; E. Menduni, *Televisione e società italiana. 1975-2000*, Milano: Bompiani, 2002; M. Buonanno, *The Age of Television. Experiences and Theories*, Bristol: Intellect, 2011.

³ F. Colombo, *La cultura sottile. Media e industria culturale italiana dall'Ottocento ad oggi*, Milano: Bompiani, 1998.

⁴ U. Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati*, Milano: Bompiani, 1964.

⁵ A. Grasso, ed., *Storie e culture della televisione italiana*, Milano: Mondadori, 2000, XV.

⁶ M. Horkheimer, T. Adorno, *Dialettica dell'illuminismo*, Torino: Einaudi, 1966.

and from television, in particular⁷. On the other, in installing itself at the heart of the national cultural industry, television began to win over intellectuals of various persuasions – often from Catholic backgrounds, because of their more positive view of the small screen’s educational potential and universalism. They attempted to tame the new medium, to channel it onto ideal, sometimes utopian, sometimes very practical lines intended to shape TV’s destiny “from the inside”. The convergence between the two opposing fronts consisted essentially in the conviction that the historical national cultures – the socialist/communist, imbued with Marxism and Neo-Marxism, and the Catholic, dedicated to a humanism suspended between traditionalism and innovation whose political voice and instrument of government was the DC⁸ – were fully equipped to understand and control the modernization process, of which television was both cause and side-effect.

The history of the relationship between television and the culture of the left can be seen as a slow relaxation of the rigid theories about the alienating and standardizing power of the media⁹. Indeed, after the sterile hostility of the Fifties and Sixties, the PSI became increasingly involved in running the RAI; then, in the Eighties, the PCI took the helm of an entire national public network after the legal changes that shifted broadcasting control from government to parliament¹⁰. The relationship between the Catholic world and the small screen was informed by the traditional vision of a positive, pedagogical use of the media as instruments of education and for spreading values, an approach that had marked Catholic culture from the turn of the century¹¹.

From profoundly differing perspectives, then, and with often diametrically opposed views, the main post-war historical cultures recalibrated their approach to broadcasting and its clearly epoch-making power, confident that they had the tools for understanding it and, to some extent, for steering it in certain directions.

For at least four decades, from the Fifties to the Eighties, the historical national cultures thus shared the dream of taming the television “beast”. For the “apocalyptic”, this meant developing a critical and ideological body of thought (elitist though it was) to guard against the TV threat. For the “integrated”, it meant a more modest yet concrete effort of guiding the new medium, curbing its excesses, and steering social change towards a ‘gentle modernization’ in line with traditional values. The PCI’s direct say in managing a network – the public channel Raitre – during the Eighties undoubtedly represented the culmination of the historical national cultures’ extreme attempt to “tame the beast”, starting from an overall vision of the world and society.

2. ITALIAN TV BETWEEN “CONTROL” AND “PROJECT”

This article aims to identify the fundamental relationships between the national cultures and the small screen over four decades, from the Fifties to the early Nineties. As will become clear, it was at the end of that period that the idea of an ideological/cultural framework for broadcasting finally died the death, and the relationship between the political cultures and television took a surprising U-turn.

⁷ Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati*.

⁸ A. Giovagnoli, *Il partito italiano. La democrazia cristiana dal 1942 al 1994*, Roma: Laterza, 1996.

⁹ S. Gundle, *I comunisti italiani tra Hollywood e Mosca. La sfida della cultura di massa, 1943-1991*, Firenze: Giunti, 1995.

¹⁰ G. Crapis, *Il frigorifero del cervello. Il PCI e la televisione da “Lascia o raddoppia?” alla battaglia contro gli spot*, Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2002; Menduni, *Televisione e società italiana. 1975-2000*.

¹¹ Colombo, *La cultura sottile. Media e industria culturale in Italia dall’Ottocento agli anni Novanta*.

Looking at the first four decades of Italian television history, we see that the country's historical cultures had two impulses that were also ways of analyzing the television medium and relating to it. The first can be termed the desire to "control"; the second, the desire to turn TV into a "project".

"Control" over television as a new medium of known hegemonic power¹² was not only a profound impulse permeating the historical cultures' approach to the small screen; it has also provided the main perspective for interpreting and narrating the history of television in Italy. As Aldo Grasso notes, most of the writing about Italian television has emphasized these aspects¹³. It has painted a picture of conflict, of a great battlefield with different "powers" locked in a struggle for "control over TV" (not only the various parties but also factions within them and individual figures). Clearly, this interpretation is now anything but outdated, like the parties' thirst for political control over television.

What we have termed the "control approach" tends to focus not on television as a complex, structured medium but rather on a particular genre – information – and a problem related to it, namely pluralism, i.e. the fair representation of political groups on TV.

Failed pluralism, longed-for pluralism, pluralism as spoil system for dishing out space, time and jobs in the TV newscasts and current-affairs programmes: the debate seemed quite dominated by this problem in certain periods of Italian television history, especially from the late Sixties to the RAI reform of 1975. The public service's main headache then was how to transition control essentially from the DC to a broader-based arrangement encompassing other parliamentary parties, as the RAI reform stipulated.

A much less-beaten track is the history of Italian television as a "project": a history that spotlights the farther-reaching and less strictly hegemonic plans constructed around television as a complex medium of different genres and expressive languages.

Indeed, "projects" embodied a more structured attempt to "tame the beast". By "project", I mean the development of a broader, more sophisticated vision than a mere quest for "control", while sharing the concern for turning the television medium's explosive power to ideal or, sometimes, ideological ends, in line with the cultures that these projects articulated. A project is not just a theoretical construct. It is a design both theoretical and practical that found scope for concrete application, in varying degrees, to the TV medium's various component aspects.

This article seeks, more specifically, to trace the history of Italian TV through the "projects" that have shaped it, focusing on two vital moments in those forty years (1954-94) that have given Italian television a series of lasting characteristics and tendencies. These two moments, although very different and far apart, are equally crucial. At a slight risk of over-simplifying, they can be associated with two key management figures in the Italian PSB arena.

The first "project" marked the birth of Italian television proper, as the Catholics took control of the RAI, and Filiberto Guala made a strong but brief impact as managing director (1954-56).

The second occurred in the late Eighties and early Nineties, with the influx of the Italian communists – soon to be post-communists – into management positions in public-service TV, as Angelo Guglielmi took charge of the third RAI network.

The essential traits of these two pivotal moments in Italian broadcasting would be reconstructed through a "systemic" historical approach¹⁴ highlighting how this project

¹² A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, Torino: Einaudi, 1975.

¹³ Grasso, ed., *Storie e culture della televisione italiana*.

¹⁴ P. Ortoleva, *Un ventennio a colori. Televisione privata e società in Italia (1975-95)*, Firenze: Giunti, 1995; Id., *Mediastoria. Comunicazione e cambiamento sociale nel mondo contemporaneo*, Parma: Pratiche

impacted on the various aspects of conceiving and making television, especially the language used and the genres that public-service TV made its own in those four decades.

3. POPE PIUS XII AND THE DC: THE CATHOLIC PROJECT FOR TELEVISION

The development of the Catholic cultural project for television dates back to the early days of the medium, the formative Fifties. As Giulia Guazzaloca has recently shown, the Catholic culture preceded, in this sense, both the socialist/communist cultures – which were fossilized in a detached rejection of the medium, considered much less important than cinema, at least until the Sixties – and the liberal ones, which would develop their own ideas from the late Fifties¹⁵.

Meanwhile, the Catholic cultural project began to take shape – albeit unsystematically and not without contradictions – and even found concrete opportunities to assert itself as early as the mid Fifties.

To understand it in the round, we need to see it as enclosed within a dual perimeter, within a specific scope bounded, on one hand, by the careful and often reasserted intervention from Pope Pius XII, Eugenio Pacelli, and on the other, by the development of an ideal yet very practical thesis of a utopian and often deeply lived social Christianity. This vision was associated with elements of Azione Cattolica (Catholic action) and FUCI (the Italian Catholic university federation), organizations politically close to the DC's more progressive wing, which took control of the party through the Iniziativa Democratica (democratic initiative) movement led by Amintore Fanfani, in the very year when television was officially established (1954).

The first perimeter, framed by the papal line, was probably the main reason that Catholic culture was quick to show interest in the modern communication media, TV in particular. As early as the late Forties, Pius XII was openly interested in the possibilities of TV and the other new media. He had broadcast messages in 1949 on American and French television; in the latter, he appreciated the medium's innovativeness perfectly, deeming it “a marvel” for the opportunity it offered to contemplate the manifestations of Catholic life *in the very moment when they would happen*¹⁶.

During the subsequent decade, alongside the recognition of television's universal potential as an instrument of new evangelism in society, a more complex, nuanced – and problematic – position gradually crystallized through numerous speeches and comments, finding full expression in the *Miranda Prorsus* Encyclical of 8 September 1957.

It contained a fully formed theological vision of modern communication media (cinema, radio and television) that would influence the Church's later doctrine on ‘social communication’, explicitly articulated in the *Inter Mirifica* Conciliar Decree of 1963 and the 1971 Pastoral Instruction *Communio et progressio*.

Wrote the Pope, “All evil of course which is opposed to right moral principles cannot have its origin in God [...] nor does it come from the techniques themselves which are His precious gifts. It can be only from the fact that man [...] can abuse those

Editrice, 1995; A. Grasso, M. Scaglioni, *Che cos'è la televisione. Il piccolo schermo tra cultura e società. I generi, l'industria, il pubblico*, Milano: Garzanti, 2003.

¹⁵ G. Guazzaloca, *Una e divisibile. La RAI e i partiti negli anni del monopolio pubblico (1954-1975)*, Milano: Le Monnier, 2001.

¹⁶ Pio XII, “Telemessaggio Voici le jour”, 17 aprile 1949, in E. Baragli, *Comunicazione, comunione e Chiesa*, Roma: Studio romano della comunicazione sociale, 1974, 566.

gifts”¹⁷. In essence, during the Fifties, Pacelli’s view became more complex and more concerned – especially regarding a medium that, unlike cinema, entered the “sanctuary of the family” and thus had special power.

Pacelli called for both “positive” and “negative” action. Knowing the new medium’s extraordinary power, he exhorted Catholics to a ‘negative’ effort based on watchfulness and censure. This approach informs the many initiatives that led to the creation of a Catholic television centre (CCT) – like the Catholic cinema centre (CCC) – headed by Monsignor Albino Galletto, who was tasked with cataloguing the programmes, making recommendations for viewers, and even mobilizing them. Galletto’s work includes the *Norme di autodisciplina per le trasmissioni televisive*, i.e. the self-regulatory code used in the RAI from 1954¹⁸.

On the other hand, Pius XII also gave a “positive” task, clearly expressed in the Exhortation *The rapid progress*, from 1 January 1954, a few days before regular broadcasts began: “May especially those whom the Church calls to Azione Cattolica, alongside the leadership, understand the need to take suitable action to make their presence felt in this field”¹⁹. It is an explicit call to become directly and practically involved in the new field of television communication. As part of the two-pronged Vatican guidelines of vigilance (with censure) and active intervention by the professionals, the active approach was coming to fruition amid the left wing of the DC. Its champion, from as early as June 1954, was an explosive personality from Azione Cattolica, just as the Pope had wanted, is Filiberto Guala.

4. GOD’S ENTREPRENEUR: FILIBERTO GUALA

The historical appraisal of Guala, the RAI’s first managing director, from June 1954 to 1956, has been shallower than that of any other figure – and often partisan. Described as an instrument of clerical influence at the RAI²⁰, he was caricatured almost exclusively as an exponent of the “negative” and censorial aspect of the papal exhortations to “vigilance”, even during his own administration. For example, he was deemed responsible for the “Self-regulatory code” – soon rechristened “Guala’s code”, as it then became widely known – even though it was actually in use months before his term began.

In reality, Guala, a man of complex character, is the key to understanding above all the positive dimension of the Catholic cultural project for television. The foundations were laid during his administration’s two stormy years, and the practical implementation, albeit in slightly different form, was taken forward during the Sixties, under the stewardship of his successor as director general, Ettore Bernabei.

Guala is too complex a figure to sketch out properly here²¹, but it is important to delineate at least some of the traits of the man who, a few short years after his dramatic exit from the RAI, became a Trappist monk at the Frattocchie di Marino monastery, in 1960.

Indeed, Guala’s background and work clearly reveal the thrust of the Catholic proj-

¹⁷ Pio XII, “Enciclica *Miranda Prorsus*”, 8 settembre 1957’, *ibid.*, 738-752.

¹⁸ This RAI internal “Code” was brought to light for the first time in A. Gismondi, *La radiotelevisione in Italia*, Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1958.

¹⁹ Pio XII, “Esortazione *I rapidi progressi*, 1 gennaio 1954”, in Baragli, *Comunicazione, comunione e Chiesa*, 635-640.

²⁰ Gismondi, *La radiotelevisione in Italia*.

²¹ For biographical details on Filiberto Guala, see AA.VV., *Filiberto Guala. L'imprenditore di Dio*, Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 2001.

ect for Italian TV. He was born in Turin in 1907, and his Christianity, profoundly spiritual yet rooted in practical deeds, would combine with a powerful managerial drive to earn him the nickname “God’s entrepreneur”. His mentor, right from the FUCI days, was Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini, who would become Vatican Secretary of State and, later, Pope Paul VI. After an engineering degree and while still a young man, the managerial qualities he showed at the Turin water company won him the top job in Italy’s most important post-war reconstruction and social-building program, “INA-Casa”, the flagship policy of the then Minister for employment and social security, Amintore Fanfani of the DC.

This appointment, which seemingly tells us little about the career of the first managing director in the country’s most important cultural industry, is actually noteworthy for two reasons. First, for it shows how Guala combined a vibrant spirituality and a social Christianity, which was not utopian at all but deeply rooted in practical action. Second, for the common thread, which Guala himself certainly saw, linking the need for material reconstruction, to offer worthy accommodation for the most economically disadvantaged Italians in the pre-“boom” years, and the need for moral and cultural reconstruction, through that national-popular project that the new communication medium could be made to serve. And no one then knew just what TV could become.

Filiberto Guala’s arrival in the RAI in June 1954 corresponded with the first attempt to enact that project, and he instantly attracted controversy and polemic. The new television medium was run by a group of managers (the “*aziendali*”, or “corporates”) who had come through the system in the radio era, in direct continuity with former state radio broadcaster EIAR. Many – like Marcello Bernardi, Antonio Piccone Stella, and music maestro Giulio Razzi – were tainted, to greater or lesser degrees, by association with the fascist regime.

Television was run directly by an ex-EIAR man, an intimist-theatre playwright and former head of drama, variety and revue programmes on the radio, who had become the “father” of the new medium: Sergio Pugliese. Pugliese had devised a *Progetto di un primo nucleo organico televisivo in Italia* (project for a first complete basic television service in Italy)²² inspired by other countries’ experiences and by a comparison between the American and British models. He envisaged Italian television as following directly in the footsteps of radio and theatre, whose genres (filmed theatre, drama, variety, musicals, and soon cinema) he plundered for TV. Pugliese’s vision was conceived largely as “a channel”, a “contentless medium”²³ populated with existing genres watered down by having to present the “limitations” of radio and theatre without their strengths.

From a political and cultural perspective, Pugliese’s TV was devised as a medium that we may term “innocuous”. For although it certainly aspired to the tripartite BBC vision of informing, educating and entertaining, it was conceived primarily as a bourgeois family theatre in various guises (drama, revue and variety), or “radio with pictures”.

In contrast, and in a decidedly confrontational approach compared to that of the “corporates”, Filiberto Guala championed a much more political vision of the medium. Above all, he grasped its powers of influence as an agent for cultural change and as a national and popular tool (and not, therefore, as a mere mirror for petty-bourgeois tastes and entertainment whims).

The analogy and continuity with the INA-Casa experience should be no surprise.

²² S. Pugliese, *Progetto di un primo nucleo organico televisivo in Italia*, type written manuscript kept at the RAI library in via Teulada, Rome, 1952.

²³ R. Williams, *Televisione. Tecnologia e forma culturale*, Bari: De Donato, 1981.

Guala took it upon himself to promote an ideal of transformation in Italian society, thus beginning to implement the Catholics' specific cultural project for television for real. We could term his approach "gentle modernization". It sought to engage growing tranches of the Italian populace and to extend, not overturn, the rich national cultural tradition of which Catholicism was a founding part. This project enshrined the (utopian) hope that the modern media, especially television, could become instruments not of progressive secularization but rather of a renaissance in Italy's cultural tradition while openly representing the difficulties and contradictions of the times and seeking to overcome them by engaging growing sections of the population, in line with the Catholic Church's social doctrine²⁴.

These two visions of television were poles apart. On one side stood the escapist "family theatre", impervious to reality on both a cultural and a social level, oriented towards an industrial implementation of the medium by the "corporates" under the expert creative helmsmanship of Sergio Pugliese. On the other side, Guala saw TV as an instrument symbiotically linked to cultural and social reality (i.e. to tradition, Christian and otherwise), a potential catalyst for development, for a progress that could save the common people, as the country's moral and material wealth grew, from the burgeoning hegemony of the forces of socialism and communism.

To realize Guala's plan, a new class of young managers needed to be trained and recruited to the RAI to supplant the prevailing conservative vision of the "corporates". And the best-known aspect of Guala's administration was indeed the first recruitment drive and the subsequent training course for young graduates, which saw the "Corsari-bianchi" generation join the RAI: "four thousand took the written test; four hundred, the oral interview; forty were hired" recalled one of their number, future newscast editor Fabiano Fabiani²⁵. It was, as Aldo Grasso wrote, a unique event in television history: "never since has the RAI found the courage or the political will to assemble the country's youngest and most brilliant intellects"²⁶. The new "Corsari" included figures from the Catholic tradition and others with a more secular background. Some did not last long at the RAI, while others became vital cogs in the machine for the attempt to implement Guala's project, a few years later, under new director general Ettore Bernabei. Thus, the RAI gained the services of important intellectuals like the philosophers Umberto Eco and Gianni Vattimo, journalist Furio Colombo and, above all, those who, under the wing of Guala-ite Pier Emilio Gennarini (who was responsible for the internal training courses), would have leadership roles in shaping Italian television. They include Fabiano Fabiani (newscast editor in the mid Sixties), Emmanuele Milano (deputy editor of the newscast and later head of Raiuno in the Eighties), Giovanni Salvi (deputy director general of the RAI), Sergio Silva (head of cultural programming on Secondo Programma from 1962 and later head of drama), Paolo Gonnelli (head of educational, cultural and schools programmes), director Liliana Cavani (responsible for cultural and journalism services for Secondo Programma in the early Sixties) and Angelo Guglielmi (head of cultural programmes in the Sixties). All in all, a significant number of RAI managers from the Fifties to the Eighties cut their teeth in the courses devised by Filiberto Guala.

²⁴ AA.VV., *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Washington, DC: USCCB, 2004.

²⁵ F. Fabiani, "Sempre mosso dalla visione del domani", in AA.VV., *Filiberto Guala. L'imprenditore di Dio*, 73-78.

²⁶ Grasso, ed., *Storie e culture della televisione italiana*, XXV.

5. THE PROJECT TAKES PRACTICAL SHAPE: FROM GUALA TO ETTORE BERNABEI

In an article of this length, it is impossible to follow all the Corsari's various strands of activity, which would interweave again four years after Guala parted company with the RAI, on Bernabei's watch. It may be more interesting to note the actual lines of development pursued by first Guala in the Fifties and then Bernabei in the next decade.

First of all, we need to recall that Guala and his successor, Bernabei, envisaged television as a "national enterprise" destined to play a role in linguistic and cultural unification – as indeed it has²⁷. Especially in the Fifties, this was not entirely an obvious path. Guala himself worked to extend the transmitter network rapidly throughout the country, "because to bring television to Milan and nowhere else would have been a nonsense"²⁸. In this sense, then, the Catholic project for television was very much a national project, rooted in the legal concept of the public monopoly.

The unification process, though, entailed more than just rapidly extending transmission coverage across a country as geographically complex as Italy. Paradoxically, perhaps, it came to fruition through a process of centralizing production, which Guala began by separating the processes of producing and devising programmes and then centralizing the latter in a department at the main RAI HQ in Rome. Television thus became the centralized terrain where the popular culture that came, on one hand, from the provinces (the variety and *avanspettacolo* traditions, for instance) and, on the other, from America (the big shows and the quiz format) was filtered and reworked with an original flavour. With television, essentially, an unprecedented form of popular culture was developing without local and regional traits, appropriating foreign (especially American) influences and moods in its own image, and helping to foster national unification²⁹.

Third, in its relations with the political and social sphere, television as envisaged by the Catholics, especially Guala and then Bernabei, was a long way from the distant and vapid state to which the "corporates" wanted to confine it. The Catholic vision originated in the desire for a more direct rapport with the real world and its social contradictions, which could not be ignored: if anything, they needed to be faced and resolved through public policies and government action, according to the interventionist policy of Amintore Fanfani's DC.

As early as the Guala era, some investigations were produced – e.g. by the *Orizzonti* programme, aired in the Fifties – into the hard life of factory workers, thus earning their makers the epithet "Catholic communists"³⁰. Hence the long tradition of social-investigation programmes (into women's status and young people), which would develop further in the Sixties through, among others, *TV7*, a late-night offering on the Programma Nazionale channel from 1963. A frank, no-nonsense take on recent Italian history aroused political controversy and diatribes in the embryonic RAI: the *Storia d'Italia* project, entrusted to the Guala-ite Gennarini in 1955, ran into trouble for its openly very critical appraisal of the fascist period. And Bernabei's subsequent attempt to break out of the quagmire of current-affairs formats that were tired and outdated (compared to

²⁷ T. De Mauro, "Lingua parlata e tv", in AA.VV., *Televisione e vita italiana*, Roma: RAI ERI, 1968, 245-294; G.L. Beccaria, "Campanile...c'era", in G. Bettetini, A. Grasso, eds., *Televisione: la provvisoria identità italiana*, Torino: Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 147-152.

²⁸ P.E. Gennarini, "Intervento", in Bettetini, Grasso, eds., *Televisione: la provvisoria identità italiana*, 119-124.

²⁹ See, in particular, the sections "In diretta dalla provincia" (live from the provinces) and "In differita con l'America" (recordings from America), *ibid.*

³⁰ Gismondi, *La radiotelevisione in Italia*.

the radio and the newspapers, which were more popular and authoritative sources) and espouse a more professional journalistic approach, by appointing newspaper man Enzo Biagi as newscast editor in 1961, would flounder after just a few months, when Biagi resigned. Clearly, the RAI's TV output in those years resulted mostly from a complex series of compromises, not without censorship and self-censorship, rather than the explicit implementation of an overall plan. Current affairs and the newscast were the areas most sensitive to the interests of the parties in government (the liberal parties, then the socialists and, naturally, the usual factions in the main governing party, the DC). In this field in particular, from as early as the Sixties, the RAI ended up cultivating an increasingly symbiotic relationship with politics, later to deteriorate into the spoil system that would mark the Seventies, especially after the reform.

But there is a fourth dimension where a cultural project can clearly be seen to have become a fully fledged editorial policy. It had been noted earlier that Guala wanted television to reflect the national cultural tradition, principally the Christian tradition, through the way it communicated as a medium, and hence in as inclusive, popular and democratic an arena as possible, not confined to the petty bourgeoisie. Perhaps the utopia consisted in the vision of a virtuous fusion of the modern communication media with traditional Christian humanist values. This utopia would be enacted in earnest primarily in the Sixties. Under Bernabei, the RAI abandoned live screenings of the middle-class theatre from the big-city playhouses, even though the genre was well suited to its middle-class audience, which had the means in television's early days to buy a TV set for the living room. Instead, he developed the TV miniseries (the "*sceneggiati*"), which gradually departed from the theatrical archetype and became more akin to major film productions³¹. And that is how the television adaptations of classic works and traditional stories came about. The TV-miniseries era was upon us, with *Il mulino del Po* (1963), *La cittadella* (1964), *I miserabili*, an adaptation of *Les Misérables* (1964), *L'Odissea*, from Homer's classic (1968), and the most ambitious work of them all, the television adaptation of the Italian novel par excellence, Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*, abridged by director Sandro Bolchi and with a screenplay by writer Riccardo Bacchelli, in 1967. Later on, ploughing the same furrow of popularizing the national cultural tradition, TV became increasingly intertwined with the film world, through Roberto Rossellini's *Gli atti degli apostoli* (1969) and *Cartesio* (1973), Liliana Cavani's production of *Francesco d'Assisi* (1966), Federico Fellini's *I clowns* (1970) and even *L'innocente* (1976) by Luchino Visconti. The TV miniseries made a special contribution, through their enormous popularity, to unifying the nation around the TV screen to follow the same storylines and the same values.

Hence, the long Bernabei era at the RAI is arguably hallmarked not only by the Catholic project for television's steady practical advance but also by a more direct and pronounced inclination for centralized control of the public service. For Bernabei was perhaps the RAI's most astute ever exponent of political control over national television, especially for current affairs and news.

These were the lines along which the Catholic cultural project for television unfolded in practical terms, in the Fifties and Sixties. It aimed to bring a 'gentle modernization' calculated to make the new medium an arena and a tool for mediating between elite and popular cultures, between ideal-driven pushes for progressive social transfor-

³¹ E. Bernabei, "Introduzione", in M. Maffioli, S. Nespolesi, eds., *Immagine RAI. Fotografie per cinquant'anni di televisione*, Firenze: Alinari, 2004.

mation and the real problems of industrialization and the economic boom, between the need for progress and the desire to maintain firm roots and values that ran deep in the nation's history.

6. RAITRE FOR THE COMMUNISTS, OR THE PUBLIC SERVICE IN THE AUDITEL ERA

The second “project period” that came to fruition during Italian television history happened thirty years later. Not that the Sixties and Seventies lacked fascinating managerial figures³², products of political cultures that introduced major innovations to the public service, especially around the time of the RAI reform. The most significant changes were due to the progressive increase in influence within PSB television of first the liberal and socialist elements and, later, the communists³³. But it was only in the Eighties, in the very culture that had remained most apocalyptically aloof from the small screen, that unprecedented moves were made not only to occupy the new ground opened up by the reform law (hence with a view to “control”) but also to radically rethink the relationships between culture, the political left, and television. These two project periods, in the Fifties and Eighties, exhibit both analogies and differences.

The later period is rooted in an important national culture, albeit one that was in the twilight of its days or was at least reinventing itself in the years immediately before and after the fall of the Berlin wall – communism and post-communism. As we have noted regarding the culture of the Catholic left and the DC, here too, the impetus behind the project came from only part of the party. For at least until the late Seventies, the PCI's approach to the television medium was largely confined to apocalyptic denial³⁴.

Another curious parallel is that the most prominent figure in this culture was a “Corsaro” who had joined the RAI under Filiberto Guala: Angelo Guglielmi, head of the third public network from 1987 to 1994. He was not a party official but an intellectual and, above all, a professional and well-informed expert on the television system's inner workings. As in the epoch of Guala's “Corsari bianchi”, moreover, a new management group developed around Guglielmi, made of professional television insiders, this time with cultural and political ties to the communist and post-communist scene.

Certainly, Angelo Guglielmi was something of a maverick within his party, the PCI. And this is precisely what led Guglielmi and his Raitre to rethink the relationship between the left and television, although the process was not entirely painless nor yet fully completed.

From the late Eighties to the early Nineties, Guglielmi's Raitre was not just a channel but rather an entity that represented an important ‘project period’, i.e. the theoretical and practical expression of a model for public-service television.

In a completely different era of television history, and of national history, Guglielmi's project essentially represented another attempt to “tame the beast”. Now that the experience of a vertical, educational type of TV, as envisaged by the Catholics in the Fifties and Sixties, had ended for good, this project embraced an epoch-making change in

³² L. Barra, “Costruire la televisione. Appunti per una storia produttiva e distributiva”, in Grasso, ed., *Storie e culture della televisione italiana*; A. Abruzzese, G. Barlozzetti, M. Bartocci, eds., *La televisione di Massimo Fichera*, Roma: RAI ERI, 2013.

³³ Menduni, *Televisione e società italiana. 1975-2000*.

³⁴ Crapis, *Il frigorifero del cervello. Il PCI e la televisione da “Lascia o raddoppia?” alla battaglia contro gli spot*; Guazzaloca, *Una e divisibile. La RAI e i partiti negli anni del monopolio pubblico (1954-1975)*.

television (and media) history. Indeed, in 1986-87, as the new Auditel company began to report the daily TV ratings³⁵, a new protagonist – which could no longer be overlooked – appeared on the media scene: the audience.

The efforts of Guglielmi (and Stefano Balassone, another of the managers who had shaped Raitre in those years) were probably the last creative attempt to “save” or “transform” the public service, by recasting it in a completely new guise, at a time of major crisis due to the advent and success of the commercial networks. In this television model, not only was the audience acknowledged, it also became directly involved in the broadcast. Raitre’s entire editorial policy under Guglielmi can be read as an attempt to engage afresh with the audience without talking down to it, for society had changed radically since the Fifties. The audience became an active partner in the communication process. This development is illustrated in some of the most characteristic and popular programmes in the network’s history, from *Telefono Giallo* (1987), which appealed to viewers to help crack unsolved crimes, to *Chi l’ha visto* (1989), which asks viewers to assist in finding missing persons, and *Linea Rovente* (1987), an aggressive journalistic investigation show that put politicians and big bosses “on trial”.

The relationship between national and supranational culture, traditionally a problematic defining moment in the history of the Italian cultural industry³⁶, is a second key to understanding Guglielmi’s TV. Under Guala, Bernabei and the Catholics, television had been envisaged as a strongly national project reconciled with the need to mediate and “domesticate” foreign cultural forms, like the quiz show³⁷. With Guglielmi, however, the overseas influences – especially a powerful trend towards reality television as a frame of reference for TV in those years and subsequently, in the USA and in Europe – were consciously appropriated, albeit within a general model whose ideal (and perhaps “ideological”) aspirations harked back to Pier Paolo Pasolini’s idea of “relating reality with reality”, as developed by Guglielmi with his *tv verità* (“truth TV”) formula³⁸.

As Bourdon underlines, the Raitre experience has much in common with other contemporary international television models³⁹. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that, at least in its theoretical design, the project is based as much on knowledge of the foreign models (*tv verità* as a translation into public-service guise of the increasingly widespread reality TV) as on a varied selection of purely domestic flavours. The first of these was the idea of using television as a catalyst to engage and create interest around certain places that had fallen into the shadows of social and public life. One such was the public forum – take Michele Santoro’s *Samarconda* (1987) or Gad Lerner’s *Milano, Italia* (1992), for example – as an arena for often highly charged political discussion and debate; the upshot was that a whole new means of political communication emerged, wrong-footing the traditional party leaders (include those at the PCI). Another example was the courtroom, which appeared on Italian TV screens for the first time on the eve of the Tangentopoli political-corruption scandal. Programmes like *Un giorno in pretura* (1988) became the most effective public representation of an entire process of trans-

³⁵ M. Scaglioni, “Per una storia culturale di Auditel”, in Grasso, ed., *Storie e culture della televisione italiana*.

³⁶ D. Forgacs, *L’industrializzazione della cultura italiana (1880-2000)*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000.

³⁷ M. Scaglioni, A. Fiacco, “Writing Games. Continuity and Change in the Design and Development of Quiz Shows in Italy”, *View – Journal of European Television History and Culture*, 4 (2013).

³⁸ A. Guglielmi, S. Balassone, *Senza rete*, Milano: Rizzoli, 1995.

³⁹ Bourdon, *Du service public à la télé-réalité. Une histoire culturelle des télévisions européennes, 1950-2010*.

formation, as the traditional political parties and the leaders who had determined the country's fate over several decades were swept away in the storm.

And finally, another element of this new mix was the desire to look hard at what Italian commercial TV was doing in its early years. This approach involved various mutual borrowings and influences, such as revisiting the approach to scheduling at times of direct public-private competition within the RAI-Fininvest duopoly⁴⁰.

Direct engagement with an audience no longer seen as people to educate but rather probed and quantified by Auditel and elevated to the status of a direct communication partner (and sometimes a protagonist in the process, even through new forms, like the TV debate forum); original reworkings of ideas and trends from abroad, such as television's progressive opening up to reality, albeit in forms adapted to suit public-service (*tv-verità*) rather than commercial TV (the reality show); new settings and scenes bursting on to the small screen for the first time in Italy (the straight-talking debating forum, the courtroom); the desire for direct engagement with the undoubted innovations brought by commercial TV, regarding both content and the competitive scheduling strategies: these are the pillars of the effort by Angelo Guglielmi and his team to devise a new model for (public-service) television in the years spanning the fall of the Berlin wall, in 1989, the demise of the PCI, in 1990, and the onset of the Tangentopoli scandal, which killed off many national political parties, including the DC and the PSI, in 1992.

If there is a fundamental difference between the "control approach" and the "project approach", it is that the projects, although not entirely free of directly or indirectly hegemonic ends, have tended to last much longer than a mere spoil system. Whereas the Catholic television project of the Fifties ultimately became synonymous with Italian TV for over three decades, the innovations piloted by Guglielmi's group were not confined to Raitre in those years. The most significant example is undoubtedly the no-holds-barred studio debate, which even now remains the dominant model of political communication on TV⁴¹.

Hence, while the history of control over television has been delineated in fine detail⁴², the definitive history of the "television projects" and their relationship with the historical and political cultures is yet to be written. This article seeks to make a start. It is a story in several chapters: the history of Italian TV has been marked by at least two major project periods when theoretical ideas were developed and put into practice. With the first, in the early years, Italian TV could have become many different things and yet became, at least in part, what a group of Catholics had sought to envision. And in the second and more recent phase, the end had finally come for the model of Italian-style public-service broadcasting – that humanistic-educational model devised by the Catholics – and a new one needed to be invented.

Both these project periods were attempts – sometimes over ambitious, sometimes ideological, but often capable of producing high-quality, effective television – to tame that remarkable, revolutionary beast of a tool that TV has been. While the organic relationship between cultures and political parties was ending during the epoch-making social and cultural changes of the Seventies and Eighties, a new and different television

⁴⁰ Guglielmi, Balassone, *Senza rete*; C. Freccero, "Il palinsesto della tv digitale", in Grasso, ed., *Storie e culture della televisione italiana*.

⁴¹ G. Mazzoleni, A. Sfondini, *Politica pop*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009.

⁴² Monteleone, *Storia della radio e della televisione in Italia*.

project would firmly take centre stage in Italy⁴³. That was commercial television, which has reflected and, at least partly, created a new culture⁴⁴.

7. CONCLUSIONS: COMMERCIAL TV, A (NEO)CULTURE IN ITALIAN TELEVISION?

The advent of commercial television in Italy during the Eighties symbolized the complex changes in the nation's cultural firmament in that decade and the ones that followed. When it arrived, commercial television – soon to become synonymous with “Silvio Berlusconi's TV” – seemed to snuff out the historical cultures' dream of exerting ‘control’ over or making ‘projects’ for the medium. For, on the contrary, TV appeared perfectly capable of constructing an essentially independent culture. But what new culture emerged with the triumph of the networks?

The new commercial channels not only complemented the public-service tradition but also conditioned it to such an extent as to force the RAI to move onto the commercial channels' own territory, to follow their rules of their game, and to lose its mission along the way. So much so, the problem of “rethinking the role of the public service” has become a *leitmotif* of the last thirty years.

Although the early TV's pedagogical intent seemed increasingly out of step with the mood in society – even though it retained a foothold on the fringes of the schedule – and although Angelo Guglielmi's Raitre attempted to claim new ground for a public service that reacted creatively to the advent of the Auditel yardstick, commercial television was all about pure entertainment on an industrial scale, with no “guilt trips” and no need for intellectual justification.

Throughout the Eighties and still at the beginning of the Nineties, public television continued to act as a “live mirror” of the country, while the private networks – which were not permitted to broadcast live – revisited and magnified national characteristics more indirectly, often mediated by collective memories of entertainment and television.

Certain tendencies that had already emerged in the Eighties gained strength and became radicalized in the subsequent decade: Nineties Italian TV focused increasingly on reality, in its various aspects and from various perspectives. This transformation – both aesthetic and anthropological – is especially evident in commercial television, which gained live-broadcast rights at the start of the decade: once a “television of escapism and fantasy”⁴⁵, it became more a “reality television” and a “window on society”. Hand in hand with the arrival of the private newscasts – a current-affairs perspective in direct competition with the public-service tradition⁴⁶ –, a propensity gradually developed for making a spectacle out of reality, especially the everyday reality of “ordinary people”. This trend had already emerged with Guglielmi's *tv verità* and went on to become the most characteristic trait across the various genres (from the reality shows to the rebirth of domestically produced drama), making TV a mirror – sometimes accurate, sometimes distorting – of society.

While Nineties TV was increasingly about formats, often bought from abroad, there

⁴³ Ortoleva, *Un ventennio a colori. Televisione privata e società in Italia (1975-95)*.

⁴⁴ L. Barra, M. Scaglioni, “Berlusconi's Television, Before and After. The 1980s, Innovation and Conservation”, *Comunicazioni sociali*, 35, 1 (2013): 79-89.

⁴⁵ Ortoleva, *Un ventennio a colori. Televisione privata e società in Italia (1975-95)*; Id., *Mediastoria. Comunicazione e cambiamento sociale nel mondo contemporaneo*.

⁴⁶ Barra, Scaglioni, “Berlusconi's Television, Before and After. The 1980s, Innovation and Conservation”.

was a clear and striking need to adapt these ‘containers’ and fill them with stereotypes and mechanisms derived from the national-popular tradition.

Italy’s *Big Brother* show, *Grande Fratello* (2000), kicked off the 2000s; with it, the process that had brought the neo-culture of commercial TV to the centre of the nation’s symbolic universe – where industrially honed mechanisms (the formats) came together with the national-popular tradition – was complete.

Over the last thirty years, television – firmly at the heart of the national media arena in both an economic and a symbolic sense – has thus forged a popular neo-culture of its own, one that is both self-referential and porous to national traditions. The traditional historical cultures have had to reckon with this widespread television culture on a political level, too. The lasting popularity of Silvio Berlusconi, who personally created that neo-culture model and then personally became a key player in Italian political life for twenty years (1994-2014), must be interpreted in light of his ability to handle it with shrewdness and intelligence⁴⁷.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*