

The TV movie scene

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Introduction

A definition of a TV film necessarily includes a wide range of elements, since its historical origins and characteristics are so diverse. There are still two main managerial and financing models for television: public and private, the European and the American, allowing for any necessary qualifications and conditions. Initially, in the early seventies, the television film in Europe was basically defined as a quality product made by "auteur" film-makers who received financial support from the public sector through television to carry out their projects and have access to a mass communications medium (television) to distribute their works. Paradoxically, that medium favoured the creation of works which were labelled minority or experimental and which the film industry in the private sector did not dare to undertake for fear of making a loss. That sphere does not include the films partly or wholly financed by the television companies and released in cinemas and shown on television later, since that formula has become a common model of financing in the European cinema, both popular and minority, especially since the incorporation of pay TV channels such as Canal +. In the United States, however, the television film, better known as the made-for-TV movie (TVM), appeared in the late sixties within the framework of the audiovisual industry as a profitable product for producers and their customers, in that case the big American networks. Their most creative aspects were set to one side and the TVM took on the role that B-movies had played from the thirties. Their development was linked to their remarkable success in the ratings, sometimes higher than television showings of major films which, in terms of the rental alone, cost the networks far more than the production of fiction specially designed for TV. The television premiere of *The Godfather* cost 7 million dollars in 1974, and at that time a TVM could be produced for an approximate cost of 400,000 to 500,000 dollars.

From a structural point of view, there were also substantial differences between the TVM in Europe (and by extension all countries with publicly owned channels) and in the United States (and also by extension the countries where private companies were dominant). Both models belong to the sphere of the telefilm, a macrogenre which basically includes the entire fictional output. In the case of the European TVM, the model is closer to the aesthetics of the cinema, whilst the American ones are more in tune with the codes of the telefilm. So the single unit telefilm is a work not divided into episodes, but equipped with a narrative structure of its own, which allows for

advertising breaks and therefore includes levels of narrative fragmentation that are not to be found in the European TVM on the public channels, where even today it is usually forbidden to interrupt the films shown on television, whatever their origin.

In spite of everything, privatisation of the European public channels is increasingly opening up the way to a single narrative model: the fragmentary one which adapts to the demands of the advertising breaks.

The American TVM run for a "standard" length (between 90 and 180 minutes), which has to adjust to the networks' schedules. A TVM, which is always prime time (the hours of maximum audience, between 8 and 11 pm) material because of its production cost, not only cultivates a fragmentary narrative structure dictated by the advertising breaks; it also has to last a precise length of time within the hours indicated, which involves additional narrative obligations. The American TVM is clearly a product within the sphere of the telefilm and is indeed often competing with a series of telefilms which broadcast "special" two-hour episodes with a single unit structure based on characters and plot situations with which the audience are already familiar. Only the public network PBS has different rules, but its financial limitations do not allow it to go beyond a minority participation in the production of films outside the commercial circuits.

In this introduction we must mention the role of Televisión Española and TV3 (the Catalan network) in the production of TVM. Not until 1979, two years later than the other European public channels, did TVE and the Ministry of Culture reach a preliminary agreement with the Spanish film industry to produce television series based on great works of literature. After numerous problems and snags, and still in the period of the political transition, the project was recycled: the financing of some series was suspended, others conserved their original structure, and yet others were turned back into films to be shown in cinemas and broadcast on TV later. Only during the brief time that Pilar Miró was director (1986-88) was there a genuine association between TVE and the film industry. For its part, TV3, with the support of the regional government, the Generalitat, embarked on the production of some TVM specifically designed to be shown first on television, but they too came up against financing problems arising from the major crisis in the publicly owned audiovisual sector, which affected most European countries.

The European model, from public to private

Television developed far more slowly in Europe than in the United States, where by 1965 there were 355 sets per 1000 inhabitants. In Europe, in spite of economic growth, the ratio at the same time never exceeded 132 sets per 1000 inhabitants. The rivalry between the two media came much later than in the USA. It is true that the overwhelming success of some programmes such as the competition "Lascia o raddoppia" (Double your Money) in Italy from as early as 1955 obliged cinemas to install televisions, since if they had not done so, on Thursdays, the day of the show,

they would have been empty, but such incidents were isolated. The growth of television in Europe was linked to a gradual but uneven improvement in the standard of living and the greater purchasing power of the public once the hardship left over from the Second World War had been eradicated, something which did not affect the USA.

That development of television in Europe inevitably ended up taking audiences away from public entertainment in general and the cinema in particular, and undermined production. The listings filled up with Hollywood films which had survived the crisis, which in their case had arisen in the fifties, and on television American series became increasingly common, since fiction production in Europe was still sparse and generally of poor quality. The film industry in European countries, however, is now, at least in part, an affair of state: good films are exported and make a contribution to the national economy, bring prestige abroad and, in a framework propitious to pro-European ideas, film producers discovered some time ago the advantages, at least the commercial ones, of joint productions. Any possible crisis in the sector, which would also endanger jobs on a large scale, therefore became a concern of the state. And television in the main European countries is publicly owned, i.e., a state monopoly. The two media are condemned to come to an understanding, even though their situations are complementary rather than balanced: television has money from state subsidies, especially the tax on the use of the sets, and the cinema has creative talent and an industry already in operation. A marriage of convenience which, for all the marital quarrels and noisy threats of divorce, has lasted for years in different shapes and guises.

Germany

In Germany, for example, it is almost impossible to talk about Rainer Werner Fassbinder without recalling that it was public television (ARD, ZDF and the regional WDR in Cologne) that financed his first films, and even *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant* came from a dramatic text written for TV. Indeed, the whole New German Cinema movement (Werner Herzog, Wim Wenders, Jean-Marie Straub) received the support of public television for the production of TVM and auteur documentaries. The production of Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and Edgar Reitz' *Heimat*, which the author defined simply as "an 18-hour film", marked the zenith of the golden years of the valuable association established by a contract founded on strict economic criteria.

Reunification (which involved absorbing the enormous deficit of East German television and creating new regional stations) and especially the emergence of private channels from the big multimedia groups (Kirch, Bertelsmann, RTL) brought about a sharp fall in the revenue of the public channels. The private channels' contribution to the cinema sector, on the other hand, was based on strictly commercial criteria and especially on the production of fictional series which kept the industry going but provided few opportunities for auteurs. One channel, ARTE, has supplied an outlet for young creators, especially in the field of documentaries, but not much in terms of TVM, and renovation is increasingly difficult, a phenomenon which in some way can be perceived all over Europe, in some cases even more intensely.

Channel Four

In the United Kingdom, on the other hand, the association between television and cinema was launched at the time when Channel Four came into operation, in 1982. The channel was initially financed by the commercial company ITV, of which it was part, but it became economically independent in the nineties. From the outset, Channel Four has produced a good number of films every year designed for release in cinemas and on television: the Film on Four seasons encouraged the emergence of new talents which, until then, had been smothered by the overwhelming domination of American films in all branches of British cinema, and the return of classics like Ken Loach who, after a few years in the wilderness, relaunched his career with a flourish with the help of Channel Four and its broadcasting of his work.

Italy

RAI-TV in Italy was a pioneer in the association between cinema and television, and from the late 60s promoted the production of films by young directors such as Bernardo Bertolucci (*The Spider's Strategy*, 1970), who previously, in 1965, had directed a three-part TV documentary series *La via del petrolio*. RAI became the great joint producer of the Italian cinema in the 60s and, with the film industry, established a policy of producing high quality TVM and miniseries such as *La Odissea* and especially *Leonardo da Vinci*. Moreover, the whole of the work of Roberto Rossellini after his spectacular comeback with *La prise du pouvoir de Louis XIV*, produced by the French channel ORTF, and his controversial words "cinema is dead", was financed by RAI, perhaps in association with other European televisions. Rossellini, the father of Neorealism, was also the forerunner of that new form of association, not only in the industry proper, but also in the creation of new concepts of *mise en scène* aimed at a new and far broader public, the television audience.

Over the years, RAI has continued to cooperate on the production of TVM and miniseries which, in many cases, could be turned back into films and released in cinemas. RAI often adopted the three-hour format (three one-hour episodes or two 90-minute ones), from which the director could make a montage the usual length of a feature film, suitable for the needs of the exhibitors, and, it must be said, those of the film festivals, where such films have collected major awards. It should be added that RAI usually reserves their distribution abroad through its distributor company SACIS and, in spite of the economic crisis of European television, still continues to pursue a policy of financing and production with the American networks, a line which the producers linked to Silvio Berlusconi's Mediaset group have also followed, with strict criteria of the economic profitability of their products.

The RTVE model

That film-miniseries formula, somewhat spurious but highly effective commercially, has been adopted by other television companies, such as RTVE, though the artistic

results have not always been successful. *La Plaça del Diamant*, which consisted of four one-hour episodes, was released in the cinema, whereas *Juanita la Larga*, with a similar format, was only shown at TV festivals, as it never found a distributor. Those miniseries were part of the TVE-Ministry of Culture project with the film industry, but when Pilar Miró was appointed director general of RTVE (1986) the association was considerably strengthened. The best directors in the Spanish cinema received financial support from RTVE, as well as the chance to work on ambitious television projects. In a way, the Pilar Miró "legacy" lasted a few years longer, since many projects were started after she had left, but the economic crisis of RTVE has cut almost all the TVM and miniseries production to merely token levels. *La Regenta* may well have been the last big production of that historic period, which is unlikely to be repeated.

The place of RTVE has not been taken by the private channels, which also have immediate economic problems of growth and infrastructures, as well as changes of ownership, which have slowed down their consolidation process. Tele 5 and Antena 3 have taken part in the production of some films, but in the end they have confined themselves to providing jobs for a few directors and scriptwriters in the TV comedies often based on shoddy adaptations of successful popular films (*Todos los hombres sois iguales* is one example). For its part, Canal + has provided substantial assistance for the production of films through Sogecable and for making new directors and actors known in the Spanish cinema in order to create a kind of star system, which can even be exported. Through small spaces such as *Piezas* they have also introduced shorts by young film-makers and worked on the production of creative documentaries. In spite of everything, and because it is a pay TV channel, Canal + has not yet produced series or TVM, but its decisive role in the new digital platforms may lead to a substantial change in that sector of audiovisual production.

First steps at TV3

In Catalonia, since 1993 TV3 has opted for producing its own fiction in the wake of the huge audience success of its soaps like *Poble Nou*, *Secrets de Família* and, most of all, *Nissaga de Poder*. Video production extends to drama series (*Estació d'enllaç*, *Sitges*, *Rosa*) and TV comedies (*Quico*, *Laura*, *Oh! Europa* and the sequel *Oh! España*), whilst its support for the cinema has taken the shape of joint productions with the weak Catalan film industry. The miniseries *Arnau* (with an extraordinary budget linked to the tenth anniversary celebrations of Televisió de Catalunya) made a considerable impact, but the first TVM, such as *!Quin curs el meu tercer!* and others, have received a lukewarm reception from audiences. TV3 produced the series *Dark Justice* jointly with the American company Lorimar and the participation of the ICC (Catalan Cinema Institute), which provided a large team of professionals and technicians. The economic and artistic results of the venture did not live up to its ambitious ideas. TV3 has also worked with other autonomous channels on series like *El jove Picasso*, which suffered production problems due to a host of divergent interests. It seems to have buried the chance of embarking on new projects for the time being.

Made-for-TV movies

The development of TVM in the USA followed the structural concepts suited to a television based on a commercial model. The criteria of economic profitability were primordial and it should be borne in mind that the TVM emerged when the big networks found themselves locked in a fierce struggle for the broadcasting rights to the most famous Hollywood films. The profits from those operations were more than satisfactory, but not all the films could supply substantial increases in the ratings. It is true that in 1966 the TV premiere on ABC of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* won a 61% share, but the cost was astronomical, and the same year the first TVM commissioned by ABC, the pilot for the series *Fame is the Name of the Game*, achieved a similar audience and cost a quarter of the rental for the David Lean film. That opened the way to the production of TVM costing between 350,000 and 500,000 dollars. In 1976 the TV premiere of *Gone with the Wind*, broadcast on two successive nights in November, scored a historic record of 56% of the share. NBC paid MGM 5 million dollars for a single broadcast. The same year, however, the TVM *Helter Skelter*, based on the massacre of Sharon Tate and her friends in Beverly Hills and also broadcast in two parts, scored a 60% share and cost just over half a million dollars.

The cost-audience ratio has always been the key element in the plans of any private television channel, and the case of *Helter Skelter* was added to a long list of TVM that could compete in terms of audience with the great films of the Hollywood studios. The turning point came in November 1971, when the TVM *The Gale Sayers Story* was on the list of the ten most watched films on American television. Its influence extended to quite different areas: the budget (450,000 dollars) was even lower than usual for the time, and it also introduced the dramatic documentary —or docudrama— format, which had a long tradition in the UK, but until then was practically unknown in the USA. Stories based on real events suddenly became a new genre with specific narrative codes and contents, and have been the starting point for innumerable TVM, from exemplary biographies as a direct result of the success of *The Gale Sayers Story* to the most recent trends dealing with abused women and spectacular trials. Although the title refers to Gale Sayers, an American football player, the fact is that the TVM focused on the personality of Brian Piccolo, one of his team mates, who died of cancer after a fierce struggle against the disease which Sayers himself recounted in his biography. That story of male friendship, moreover between an almost unknown white player and a famous black one, was told in an intimate, melodramatic style and started a trend which is still going strong today with the elements we have mentioned incorporated.

Struggles against almost always incurable diseases became the leitmotif of TVM in the sixties and seventies. Later came the "social" themes, basically aimed at female audiences, with highly successful series such as *Roe versus Wade*. In the nineties there has been a search for immediate treatments of scandalous and gruesome cases such as the O.J. Simpson trial, which was the object of various TVM based on contradictory books or accounts and made by different producers.

The TVM took the place of the classic B-movies, which revived the industry in

Hollywood in the years of the Depression. Although the budgets have increased, they are still far from the levels of the big Hollywood productions, and offer the TV channels other advantages. As this is a product specifically created to be broadcast on television, its moral codes are strictly respected (especially concerning sex, violence and language) and do not transgress social rules: the corrupt policeman or the doctor who does not do his duty to the point of self-sacrifice, for example, are simply the black sheep of a mostly honest community. When a general interest television channel buys a film, on the other hand, it is often forced to produce a new montage to eliminate situations which would be unacceptable to its mass audiences, and if necessary even the soundtrack is doctored to find euphemisms to replace the rude words. The most spectacular case was when the dialogue of *Saturday Night Fever* was completely redone; it seems that the young characters used a coarse language which made it impossible to show at peak time. With the TVM there is no problem of that kind, since the producers work *à la carte* for the television channels, and in any case add erotic or violent scenes for the video copies that provide one of the commercial outlets for the films, or for a second showing on pay channels, where the regulations are much less strict.

TVM after 2000

The future TVM are closely connected to the audiovisual macromodels of television financing and production. In Europe the monopoly public ownership model has definitively entered a crisis in spite of the comeback by the social democratic centre-left parties, now in a majority in the European Union, which seems at least to ensure the continuity of the public service within a context of more or less fierce competition, depending on the country, with the private sector.

In any case, both sectors are almost forced to support the film industry in order to fill their peak broadcasting hours with fiction. Europe is still suffering from an alarming shortage of production of its own, whilst American producers and distributors have the advantage of a ground guaranteed by the European channels' programming grids, especially the private or specialised ones. The multibroadcasting system of the digital platforms, with many channels showing nothing but films, cannot go beyond a certain ceiling of repeats without running the risk of saturation and hence a fall in the number of subscribers. It is not surprising that multinational companies such as Canal + are the main co-producers of European cinema, even ahead of the public channels, which have lost their traditional hegemony.

New distribution channels

In the USA, however, production is increasing not only because of the constant demand by the networks, but also because of the spectacular growth of the European private sector, which also has a fairly healthy economic base. The TVM have achieved a language of their own based on an intimate treatment of themes, which enables them to present conflicts with social repercussions, often very local, from progressive or

conservative standpoints, but always with a tendency towards consensus. The TVM seem to have definitively occupied the place of the B movies and even the enjoyable quickies of the 30s by dealing with the burning issues of the day or taking advantage of the backwash of the advertising campaigns for the big feature films released at the same time: the miniseries and TVM connected with the "Titanic" are a good example.

The future of the TVM also lies in multimedia distribution. In the case of the USA, their journey begins on the general interest channels or HBO (pay TV), then goes on to rental or purchase video (often with new and more explicit scenes of sex and violence), then to the European and world pay channels, the American syndicated local stations, the general interest channels and finally multi-distribution through the specialised channels of the digital platforms, where rebroadcasts can go on for years, as we can see from the constant showings of *Duel*.

In Europe the route is usually different. The public and pay channels take an active part in the financing of the films to ensure that they will be premiered on television. They are not TVM in the strict sense of the phrase; they are films that are designed for a twofold exploitation (cinema and TV) and conceived as specifically cinematic products. Those pre-purchase rights are fundamental to the production of European films and without such assistance it is almost impossible to get them off the ground. Once a cinema release, albeit an increasingly short one, has been guaranteed, the film first passes through the pay channels and then the general interest ones (almost always publicly owned) which have taken part in the financing. Video, sales to other channels and the specialised channels complete the complex itinerary.

The production of European TVM, however, has been gradually cut back due to high production costs and lack of interest. Moreover, the double film-miniseries format has not brought the desired artistic and commercial results, since the narrative pace of the two is different and directors have been more concerned with the film than finding a suitable tempo for the miniseries, which has been seen as a kind of marginal or residual format aimed at audiences who are supposedly less demanding than cinemagoers. The formula has been more or less abandoned, and replaced by drama series or comedies produced for television which have been conceived and directed by film directors.

The future of television films corresponds to the conditioning factors and peculiarities of the television models in different countries. In a context totally dominated by the Hollywood industry, which regularly and successfully transforms itself in order to survive, public television and the pay channels are the only ones that can provide young creators with access to the cinema without being subject to the commercial demands of the production and distribution of a film.

If we do not want the universities to fill up with frustrated new directors who have resigned themselves to passing on their erudite knowledge to their students, we need to conserve and even increase protection for the institutions that enable the production of auteur films which are not strictly conditioned by the laws of the market. In any case,

the multimedia product seems to be the inevitable condition for films for television in these difficult days at the end of the millennium.

