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'Everybody Liked It: Collective Memories of Early Flemish Television Fiction'

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[Current Contents](#)

[Past Issues](#)

Everybody Liked It: Collective Memories of Early Flemish Television Fiction

Abstract

This article investigates the early history of Flemish television, based on oral history interviews with older viewers. After a discussion of the method used and other literature in the field, I focus on the most successful domestic series of the period, *Schipper naast Mathilde* (*Skipper near Mathilde*, 1955-1963). This series evokes strong and fond memories, which are partly explained by the interviewees themselves. However, it is also necessary to look beyond those reflections and to include information on the broader media and social context. In this way, we get an enlightening sight on the process of collective memory formation.

Key words:

historical reception research; oral history; television drama; Flanders

This article aims to reconstruct the early history of Flemish television, and in particular the reception of serial fiction at that time.^[1] It is based on oral history interviews with older viewers, about their memories of domestic drama. This research is part of a broader project on memories of all television fiction from of the period of monopolistic public broadcasting (1953-1989), but the present account is limited to the first decade of broadcasting. After a discussion of the method used and other literature in the field, I explore one of the most salient findings: the fact that *Schipper naast Mathilde* (*Skipper near Mathilde*, 1955-1963), the first domestic series seen by the interviewees, evokes the strongest and fondest memories. This is partly explained by the interviewees themselves, but it is also necessary to look at the broader media and social context of the time. The analysis of this concrete instance helps to understand more general mechanisms in the process of collective memory formation. Beside that, I also want to plead for the use of oral history as a valuable method of audience research, generating a wealth of concrete details on everyday processes of television viewing.^[2]

The historiography of television viewing

This project was confronted with a common problem in television historiography, the scarcity of resources, which strongly shapes such research (Corner, 2003: 277). In the early years of Flemish television, hardly any information on viewer responses was recollected. Although television started in 1953, systematic viewer research was only conducted from 1969. Moreover, this research was more interested in viewing figures than viewer interpretations, though appreciation figures were generated. For the period until 1969, most existing information on viewer responses is indirect, appearing in the BRT's annual reports, in retrospective accounts by broadcasters and in press criticism. Only viewer letters offer a glimpse on actual responses, but few of those are available and they are hardly representative. Therefore, retrospective interviews with viewers are one of the few means to historically reconstruct actual viewing processes.

Beside the lack of alternative sources, there is also a more fundamental reason for the use of oral history interviews. Traditionally, television historiography (both internationally and in Flanders) has tended to be preoccupied with institutional aspects such as legislation, policy-making and broadcasting structures, rather than with programme content and particularly viewer responses. However, according to Anderson and Curtin, a 'cultural turn' has occurred in media historiography, shifting from history from above to history from below. They note a growing interest in the everyday social and cultural contexts of media use, but they equally remark on the lack of information on historical reception (Anderson & Curtin, 2002). While some research has started to fill in this gap, knowledge of early television viewing is still fragmentary. Moreover, there are major methodological obstacles to be taken in historical reception research.

One possible approach is to use the kind of 'indirect' evidence mentioned above, such as press criticisms and wider cultural discourses. This method was first elaborated in the work of Lynn Spigel (1992) on the introduction of television in America. She reconstructs the intertextual context of this process, analysing media discourses in magazines, advertisements, newspapers, television programs and films to chart cultural anxieties about the medium. As she admits, these don't directly reflect how people responded, but they do reveal the intertextual context through which people might have made sense of television. Janet Staiger (1992) uses a similar approach in her analysis of the historical reception of American cinema, mostly stressing contextual factors. She proposes a 'materialist historiography', assuming interaction between context, text and individual 'in which a perceiver's socially and historically developed mental concepts and language may be only partially available to self-reflection and are most certainly heterogeneous'. Staiger's approach fits within a wider and emerging trend of historical reception studies on film, dealing with cinematic practices, intertextual elements and social contexts of film viewing.^[3]

While those approaches rightly point at the importance of (discursive, historical) contexts and at the limits of the viewers' own reflections, their accounts of viewer responses remain indirect and hypothetical. They reconstruct 'historical prospects for viewing' (Klinger, 1997: 114), not actual viewer responses. More empirically anchored analyses of viewer responses can be found both in film and in television studies. In film studies, Jackie Stacey's *Star Gazing* (1998) stands out as a good example of research taking into account the historical specificity of concrete viewer responses. To study memories of Hollywood cinema among British women, she uses letters responding to an ad in women's magazines, followed up by a questionnaire addressing the themes emerging from the letters. While this provides an equally indirect way into the past through retrospective reconstruction, Stacey pleads not to consider representation as a barrier to (unmediated, 'true') meaning, but rather as the form in which meanings (unavoidably) come (Stacey, 1998: 56-60).

Annette Kuhn's book *An Everyday Magic* (2002) covers similar ground, investigating British cinema culture in the 1930s through 'ethnohistorical' research. This research is inclusive, studying both texts and audiences using different sources: traditional historical sources, ethnographic inquiry through interviews and textual analysis. Kuhn introduces the term 'memory texts', to describe the recorded acts of remembering, where the past is produced in the activity of remembering. In recounting the past, informants are doing 'memory work', staging and performing memories (Kuhn, 2002: 9).^[4] This research shares the conviction of contemporary memory studies that memories don't reflect the past but reconstruct it through representation. Thus, Anderson (2001: 22-23) describes memory as a site of discursive struggle, so that understanding the formation of memories is not to 'uncover' the past, but to analyse the formation of discourses on the past. However, the constructed nature of memories doesn't imply they are pure inventions. As noted by Radstone (2000: 10), memories always have a link, however indirect, with historical experience, with 'what happened'. Therefore, they are a valuable historical source, though one to be used with caution.

Stacey's and Kuhn's research into audience memories stands out in the context of film studies, where historical reception has long been a neglected topic (Allen, 1990; Meers, 2001). Although there has been a recent upsurge of historical film audience research, empirical research, including the use of actual viewer memories, is still quite exceptional. Klinger (1997), in her overview of historical reception research, pleads for the inclusion of diachronic areas of study, different contexts in which film are used after their initial appearance. However, here again, there is no mention of actual audience responses.

Allen (2006: 49) blames this absence in film studies on the deep-rooted suspicion of the empirical, and the tendency to confuse engagement with the empirical world outside the film text with empiricism.

In television studies, empirical audience research is much more developed, with contemporary 'ethnographical' research as an important trend from the 1980s, but here

too historical research is a relatively underdeveloped subfield (Anderson & Curtin, 2001: 23). However, there are some examples of empiric analyses based on viewer memories (e.g. Matthews, 2003; Spigel, 1995). Much of this research focuses on early radio and television. Thus, Moores (1988) investigates the impact of early British radio on everyday life using oral history interviews. In a similar study, O'Sullivan (1991) analyses British television memories and cultures of viewing using interviews. He finds that most people remember their early encounters with television, though in a sentimentalised and fragmented way. Programmes take centre stage in their recollections, as well as the shared experience of watching. To O'Sullivan, television has been an important force in the formation of popular memory from the late 50s onwards. Not only live events, but also drama and fictional programs, especially comedies and serials, are fondly remembered. Particularly relevant to our research is the clear distinction he finds between viewers who have always known television and those who remember its introduction, for whom this was a significant event (O'Sullivan, 1991: 163).

Studies in other national contexts show many similarities, but also some differences, in memories of early television. Hanot (2003) discusses the introduction of French-language television in Belgium, an interesting counterpart of our research. Based on 50 semi-structured interviews, she concludes that early television is remembered as being better, for three reasons. First, early television is situated in a period that is remembered as 'better', with the introduction of television as a magical moment, discovered collectively. Second, the former programme content is remembered as 'better' and more elevated. Third, early television is remembered as a medium that united families for collective viewing (Hanot, 2003: 36). While all of the above research identifies the introduction of television as a memorable moment, van Zoonen and Wieten (1994) find that the arrival of television isn't remembered as a transformative moment in Dutch family life, mostly because of the hardship in the post-war period. They qualify this finding, noting that it may be the result of a lack of reflection on everyday life by the respondents, and of a particularly Dutch, noncommittal manner in relating to the outside world (van Zoonen & Wieten, 1994: 649-50). Finally, Bourdon (1995) studies memories of French television using viewer letters and interviews about viewers' 'televisual biography'. Like all the researchers mentioned earlier, he is conscious of the formative nature of the interview, the recollected memories operating as an active, socially determined reconstruction of the past. Bourdon equally concludes that the introduction of the medium is remembered as an important moment, and like Hanot's, his respondents criticise the lowering standards of television (Bourdon, 1995: 17).

Memories of *Skipper near Mathilde*

Moving on from the above research on general television memories, this research focuses on memories of domestic fiction. As to method, oral history interviews were used. The interviews were semi-structured, following an interview guide with fixed starting questions, but leaving space for the respondents' own stories. The interview was divided

in three parts, moving from an open investigation of general memories to detailed questions on specific programs, using a list of titles. The respondents were all over sixty at time of the interview, so they (can) have consciously lived the introduction of television fifty years ago. This leads to a relatively homogeneous age group, so the analysis has to take into account characteristics of this viewer group. Most research on older viewers finds they combine criticism on the current offer of television programs (mostly sex and violence) with nostalgia for former programs of their younger years (e.g. Gauntlett & Hill, 1999: 200-1; Hackl, 2001: 210; Healy & Ross, 2002; Tulloch, 1992: 181). Beside the general tendency towards nostalgia, this illustrates that people tend to hold on both to television tastes and to moral standards they have acquired in their younger years.

Forty viewers were interviewed, from a diversity of backgrounds. This research wasn't meant to be representative, but it did want to make an argument about the 'common viewer'. Therefore, instead of self-selection (which may lead to homogeneity), a snowball method was used to select interviewees.^[5] As to age, twenty respondents were under seventy, twenty were seventy or older and therefore young adults at the start of television. As to gender, twenty men and twenty women were interviewed (ten of each in both age groups). Finally, to assess class positions, a variation of educational and occupational backgrounds was aimed for, about 50/50 higher education/intellectual jobs and lower education/manual jobs. Throughout this text, the interviewees will be referred to anonymously, but their age, gender and occupation will be mentioned to indicate their socio-demographic properties. Quotes will be used to evoke the concrete 'feel' of the interviews and the language used to talk about the past.

Asking viewers about their memories of Flemish television fiction between 1953 and 1989, the series most spontaneously and vividly remembered is *Skipper near Mathilde* (further referred to as *Skipper*). This was the first real series, and the only one for a massive eight years and 185 episodes.^[6] It was a very 'popular' programme, with strong comic types and a mild but eccentric humour. The protagonists were retired skipper Matthias and his gentle sister Mathilde. It was both a proto-soap, showing daily life of common people in a small Flemish village, and a proto-sitcom exploiting a comic situation in every instalment. The tone was popular, verging on the folkloric, as the series showed a traditional and nostalgic image of Flemish village life.



Skipper near Mathilde: Skipper Matthias, his cousin Marieke and his sister Mathilde (©VRT/Gilbert Weyers)

The vividness of memories of this series is all the more remarkable because it hasn't been repeated ever since, as it was broadcast live from the studio before the introduction of magnetic tape. Only a few episodes were conserved, mostly the ones using film stock for outside shooting. Nevertheless, thirty-three out of the forty interviewees spontaneously name this series, and the remaining seven remember it when presented with a list of titles. Out of the thirty-one other series, only seven more are spontaneously named, one by twenty-one respondents and the other each by three to five. This is in line with a 1996 survey showing that *Skipper* was one of the best-remembered TV programs, only preceded by the first moon landing, King Baudouin's funeral and the Gulf War (*De Standaard*, 6/11/1996). However, it is important to note that the strong memories of *Skipper* were salient and vivid rather than accurate or precise. The interviewees remembered the general premise of the series, as well as its major characters and actors, but they remembered very little scenes or concrete storylines.

The interviews contain many elements that help us understand the centrality of *Skipper* in viewer memories. To start, *Skipper* was widely watched. While there was no audience research of any kind at the time, many anecdotes demonstrate that it was so successful as to partly determine social life. For instance, on Friday nights when *Skipper* was broadcast, few meetings and sport games were planned (Anthierens, 1964: 22). As an April Fool's joke, on April 1st of 1960 the announcer proclaimed the planned episode of *Skipper* would be replaced by a talk about the influence of cosmic radiation on apiculture, which reportedly led thousands to switch off their television sets and hundreds to send letters of protest to the BRT (Grossey, 1993: 97). As various commentators remark, the streets were empty at the time *Skipper* was broadcast.

The respondents confirm this view. Thus, a 60-year-old university professor claims everybody knew about it: 'I didn't watch much television in that period. But *Skipper near Mathilde* is something everybody knew. Even if you didn't watch it, you knew it, you knew

about it.^[7] As one of many respondents, she remarks on the neighbourhood rituals surrounding the viewing of *Skipper*: everybody went in to watch, and everybody talked about it. 'Everybody' is relative, particularly for the early years, as television sets were few at that time. In 1956, there were some 72.000 sets in Belgium, in 1957 130.000, but by the last year *Skipper* was broadcast, 1963, there were 1.150.000. 682.000 of those were owned by Flemings, out of a total of approximately 5.500.000 Flemings (BRT, 1978: 28-29).

Not only did many viewers watch *Skipper*, they also dearly loved it. This is clearly illustrated by the fond memories of this series, also among the interviewees, many of whom say their best memories are of *Skipper*. Many comment on the good and 'natural' acting in the series, in particular by lead player Nand Buyl, whose name is remembered by most, as well as that of his later wife Chris Lomme, playing his young cousin Marieke in the series. However, illustrating the vagueness of memories, there is confusion over Marieke, some remembering her as the (unmarried) skipper's daughter, one even as his wife. The positive evaluation of *Skipper* contrasts with the outright negative public reception by intellectuals. For instance, writer Hugo Claus worded the reservations of the 'educated' Flemings stating: 'Television can be a captivating medium. However, in general Flemish television operates on a primary level. Maybe they will evolve. But the viewers setting the tone mostly like *Skipper* near *Mathilde*, so...' (Grossey, 1995: 168).

Even within the broadcasting institution, which was primarily staffed with 'modern' intellectuals, there were second thoughts concerning a popular programme like *Skipper*. Though fiction was an important programme category from the start, it was mostly conceived as 'decent', middlebrow single plays with a strong theatrical pedigree. In this period, fiction was produced by the *Section of Dramatic and Literary Broadcasts*, which was part of the *Division of Cultural Broadcasts* with a marked preference for high-cultural and literary material. This explains why Director of Television Bert Leysen had to justify *Skipper* to Director-General Jan Boon during the first season: 'The aim is to program a series of popular sketches without primarily artistic intentions' (Internal Memo Bert Leysen, 1/06/1955). He proposed to keep the program until the end of the season and then to evaluate it. The 1960 Annual Report illustrates the continuing ambiguity of the BRT towards *Skipper*: 'It didn't always hit the mark, but it is still one of the most popular programs' (BRT, 1960: 43). Finishing the series in 1963, the aim was to create a comic alternative about a 'normal, modern family with a decent social standing' (BRT, 1963: 58). The condescending attitude of the broadcasting officials towards *Skipper* illustrates their aspiration towards cultural respectability.

The press reviews were also mixed, often criticizing the poor 'quality' of the show. While, again, this betrays a clear aversion to the popular, at least on the level of professional quality and execution the criticism is partly justified. To start, there were no trained screenwriters, so finding good material was a question of trial and error. Different writers, including established novelists, were solicited to contribute, so on the whole the quality of the scripts was variable and they were little adapted to the specificities of the medium.

Moreover, *Skipper* was broadcast live from the only and small studio available, which led to many technical and acting faults. Most of the roles were played by older actors with a full-time job in the theatre, so *Skipper* was broadcast on their day off (Grossey, 1995: 166). The actors were talented, but their performances were highly theatrical. ^[8]

Only one respondent, a 63-year-old male marketer, repeats the press criticisms, describing the acting as somewhat wooden and theatrical. Not coincidentally, he has a university degree and he belongs to the same intellectual middle class as the critics and broadcasters of the time. One other respondent, a 68-year-old female nurse, echoes the upper middle class reservations concerning the show: 'You didn't like it, but you did watch it'. This somewhat contradictory response illustrates memory work in action: the interviewee both admits to having watched *Skipper* (with pleasure, as she indicates elsewhere), but she also distances herself from it, probably to make a 'respectable' impression on the (academic) interviewer. ^[9] While, based on the press criticism, one could expect many more comments on the poor 'quality' of *Skipper*, all the other respondents are extremely positive about the series. Despite obvious flaws of execution, the humorous, gentle small-village tone of *Skipper* seems to have responded to a particular viewer interest. When asked if she thought *Skipper* was good, a 63-year-old housewife responds: 'Very good, very good. It was also meant to laugh, and so real... It could really make me scream with laughter.' More generally, the overall atmosphere of the programme struck the right chord. For instance, a 71-year-old housewife remembers appreciating the pleasant atmosphere of the program, while a 60-year-old female professor remembers its simplicity and cosiness:

I remember it were actually very simple situations. Almost... a living room where something cheerful happened, or where there was some sadness. Almost the kind of sketches we would play around the campfire. That's what I remember, the cosiness.

A 90-year-old male farmer remembers its innocence, while a 75-year-old seamstress links this to a high degree of recognition: 'They represented everything as we have known it in our own lives. In my view, it was much more spontaneous, more ordinary, not as much sex and not as contrived.' These responses witness of the nostalgia inherent in memories of *Skipper*, but also of the importance of ordinariness, realism and recognition. For instance, a 74-year-old female employee remarks:

Everybody liked it, because it was so real, and so recognisable. (...) To me, it was daily life, the comings and goings of everyday life. (...) *Skipper near Mathilde* was so recognisable. It was a very common household with a warm atmosphere. That was easy to recognise.

This is a recurring discursive theme in memories about the period: most viewers claim to have the most positive memories of programs that dealt with normal, everyday life. As a 67-year-old male musician remarks: 'Among common people that came across best. You see, those were all situations occurring in daily life. It wasn't faked, it was all spontaneous and played spontaneously by good actors.'

In their statements on the quality of the programme, viewers are less preoccupied with formal or aesthetic aspects such as the execution and production values, than with the (recognisable) content and the enjoyable tone. In the terms introduced by Liebes and Katz (1990), one could say that the viewers take a referential rather than a critical stance. They compare and relate the images of *Skipper* to their own world rather than pondering on their constructed nature. The rationale for liking the programme seems to be related to the social value of watching: seeing one's world reflected on television in a cosy, comforting way. However, it is important to remember that this research studies memories of appreciation rather than the (original) process of evaluation as such. It is hard to filter out the impact of retrospection and nostalgia, which certainly partly taints these overwhelmingly positive memories. At these points in the interviews, the memory work in performing the past from a contemporary perspective becomes most apparent. The responses speak of a strong longing for the 'simple and innocent' past, which is implicitly or explicitly opposed to the present (both on and off screen). This illustrates the use of popular memory to create a 'history for the present', speaking to the needs of contemporary life: 'Popular memory is a form of storytelling through which people make sense of their own lives and culture' (Spigel, 1995: 21).

The broadcasting context

While many reasons for the memorability of *Skipper* can be attributed to characteristics of the text, it is important also to take into account its broadcasting context. For a start, it was the longest running series of the public broadcasting era, which increased the chances of people actually seeing it. Moreover, *Skipper* was broadcast bi-weekly in a fixed slot over the years, which made it one of the first habitual shared viewing experiences, again contributing to its memorability. It was also the first domestic series many viewers saw and the only one for eight years, which goes a long way in explaining its special status. For many, memories of *Skipper* coincide with the first memories of television, greatly adding to their salience.

The appeal of *Skipper* was undoubtedly partly based on the novelty of the medium: observing Flemish people in everyday situations in the privacy of one's own home was a fascinating sight. Put simply, *Skipper* was watched because it was new. For instance, a 69-year-old female factory worker commemorates: 'We thought it was fantastic, because it all was so new'. A 67-year-old tradeswoman calls it an outright event: 'That was a big event, everybody was talking about it: have you seen this, or have you seen that.' This early awe for *Skipper* was quintessentially the amazement of discovering a new medium, respondents calling it a miracle, a revelation and a sensation, like this 90-year-old farmer: 'It was an enormous sensation. It was like a magic trick, you were sitting in front of that glass and you could see anything you wanted.' However, a 69-year-old male doctor adds a more mundane reason for watching *Skipper*: 'It was a phenomenon, it was one of the first things, so you were inclined to watch it, because... There wasn't much at that time, the choice was limited.'

Indeed, both the general television output and the fiction offer were limited, and viewers weren't used to very much yet, as many respondents stress. One implication of the scarcity of programmes is that perhaps, *Skipper* wasn't as good as it is remembered. For instance, a 76-year-old housewife suggests people would have watched anything: 'In the beginning when you have TV, you just watch anything. (...) Now I wouldn't watch *Skipper*, but then, it was the first.' Another respondent, a 70-year-old male technician, is outright negative: 'I liked it at the time, for it was the first we set eyes on. Looking back, it didn't amount to very much.' Having seen a short clip recently, a 63-year-old female teacher found it disappointing and 'below anything'. As little material is safeguarded, the general positive memories of *Skipper* may be strongly instilled by a nostalgia that is little affected by repeated viewing. But then again, it may not be coincidental that such comments mostly come from viewers with a higher education, who may be most preoccupied with making a good impression on the interviewer and who may be more sensitive to the 'moral hierarchy of programmes' (Alasuutari, 1992).

Analysing the interviews, it becomes increasingly clear that the viewers' memories of *Skipper* are closely intertwined with their memories of early television, and that their fondness for *Skipper* is due to no small degree to their nostalgia for this period. Thus, when asked for their first memories of television, quite a few respondents name *Skipper*, along with events like the Brussels World Exposition in 1958, King Baudouin's marriage in 1960, and major sports matches and game shows. This echoes O'Sullivan's findings mentioned above, namely that programs tend to stand central in viewers memories. Moreover, in terms of viewing context the respondents have more elaborated memories of the early period than of any other, which confirms its special status. This corresponds to Hanot's (2004: 52) findings that viewer memories of French-language Belgian television 'before', between 1954 and 1962, are more detailed than memories of the subsequent periods, which are more vague and compact.

In Flanders, television was introduced in 1953, but the first respondent only had access to television in 1954. Only seven had television in their homes before 1958, and at the time, they were 'pioneers', as a 90-year-old farmer points out: 'We were the first in the village. They came from far and near to watch at our place.' Many stress that television was still very expensive at this time, which delayed the introduction of the medium and led some respondents to build their own sets. Indeed, the early adopters were often more interested in the technical side of the medium than in its content, which corresponds to the findings of Hanot (2004: 35) on television and Moores (1988: 28) on radio. At this early stage, television viewing was literally a question of getting an image, by turning the antenna after the wind moved it or to get different channels from different masts, by adapting the test image to get a good shape and contrast, and by switching the amount of lines. As a typically Belgian compromise between the French system of 819 lines and the European system of 625 lines, the Belgian television sets were multi-standard, and therefore even more expensive than elsewhere.

From 1958, television started to spread more rapidly, also among the interviewees, the majority of which (25) had a set in their home between 1958 and '63 (the last year of *Skipper*). This was prompted by a number of important events, such as the abovementioned World Exposition and the marriage of King Baudouin. As noted by Hanot, owning a set at this time was also a question of 'social belonging' (Hanot, 2004: 35). Thus, a 60-year-old male broker says: 'It was a status symbol at the time. You could easily see who owned one, because then there was a big antenna on the roof.' From the mid-sixties, television became part of everyday life, all the respondents owning one before 1968. It also became a permanent fixture of domestic life, all the respondents confirming they have always had television since.

One particularity of early television that may partly explain the memorability of *Skipper* is the fact that viewing was usually communal, most viewers watching television elsewhere. Shop windows were often the first places where television was spotted, and watching there - mostly without sound - was more a question of wondering at the novelty of it than of actually watching a program. Thus, a 83-year-old teacher says: 'We went to watch in the shop-window where a television was on, but we didn't stay there to watch a program, we stayed there to see what a television actually was.' Note the plural tense, which abounds in memories of this period and which confirms the communality of the viewing process. Similarly, a 69-year-old housewife remembers watching in a shop window after evening school, adding: 'We couldn't get away from it, we couldn't believe such a thing came on screen.' Another respondent, a 60-year-old female professor, actually remembers first seeing a television play in the house of the owner of an electronics shop, noting it was really television 'like theatre' at the time.

This brings us to a second place where many respondents remember watching television in the early years, the house of friends, neighbours or relatives. A 60-year-old journalist remembers watching in a friend's house, echoing the above remark on the theatricality of the experience: 'They had television and that was still a big wooden cupboard. I've seen that in many families: there was a little curtain in front of the television. The people all took a seat, the chairs were lined up, the curtain was opened and we watched the theatre.' The cinema was another point of comparison, as in the memories of a 60-year-old female factory worker who went to watch in her grandmother's house: 'We all sat in a row to watch television, as in the movie theatre'. These comparisons suggest that early television viewing was different from the typical viewing process described in literature: the viewing group was not restricted to the nuclear family but included a wider community, and viewing was more attentive than the distracted 'glance' deemed typical of later television viewing (e.g. Ellis, 1992: 113 & 128).

Skipper was often the programme watched on such occasions, as a 66-year-old female factory worker commemorates: '*Skipper near Mathilde* was the first thing I saw. At the time that was broadcast, few people had television. We went to watch at the neighbours and there all those people came together to watch television.' Television was still special,

and memories of *Skipper* are tinted with that aura. For instance, a 60-year-old male broker remembers some viewing rituals:

Sometimes we went to watch at aunt Josephine's, but that was rare as aunt Josephine was very strict, everything had to stay very clean there. We even had to bring our slippers and wear clean clothes. The television set was a sanctuary back then, standing in the nicest room. We all had to sit nicely in a row and we could only watch particular programmes. When the programme was finished, you were supposed to go home.

On the whole, such communal viewing seems to have been more regulated than subsequent familial viewing. Moreover, the above quote suggests selectivity, groups of people watching particular programs rather than 'television'. Individual programs like *Skipper* were singled out, again a far cry from later processes of submersion in the strongly segmented television 'flow' as described by Williams (1990: 86-96) and Ellis (1992: 116).

McCarthy (2000: 452) notes the importance of urban taverns and barrooms as a setting for early television viewing in the United States, mostly catering sports programmes to a male audience. In Flanders, the equivalent was the local 'café', not only for sports events but also on special occasions and for *Skipper*. One respondent, a 68-year-old female nurse, was brought up in a café and fondly remembers the introduction of television:

My parents bought a television when King Baudouin married. They had a café, and I remember they bought a television. The whole café was full, the whole neighbourhood was there, my father had made a large pot of soup. That was an event! Then the television moved into the house. But for a long time, particularly for *Skipper near Mathilde*, the television set was moved back into the café, and people really came to watch *Skipper near Mathilde*.

Again, note the memory work: the past is represented to the interviewer in a very praising way, stressing the communality of viewing and the special status of this experience in the interviewee's life. Another respondent remembers going to watch in a café:

We only bought a television in 1967. Before that, we always went to watch in café *De Sportwereld (The World of Sports)*. Every week we went to watch *Skipper near Mathilde* there. Then, many chairs were set up like in the cinema and we watched a small black and white screen. That was very pleasant, with the whole neighbourhood.

As far as these memories are representative, it seems that the café wasn't an exclusively male viewing context and that sports weren't the only content attracting viewers, as noted by McCarthy in an American context. However, her finding that tavern owners hosting televised sports sold up to 60% more seems to have had a Flemish equivalent with *Skipper*, as suggested by this 87-year-old female shopkeeper: 'There was nobody on the streets, and in the cafés there were no people unless they had a TV.'

Broader contexts

As indicated above, a first important context for viewer memories of *Skipper* is the age of early television, when the medium was still a novelty, the programme offer was scarce and viewing was mostly communal. *Skipper* is partly memorable because the period in which it was broadcast was special and therefore memorable. The biographical context is another explanatory factor, as memories of early television are often attached to biographical information. For instance, the purchase of a television set is often linked to an important life event such as a marriage or the birth of a child. The biographical context is all the more important, because the interviewees were all adolescents or young adults at the time of *Skipper*. Thus, memories of *Skipper* are coloured by the general sense of nostalgia for their youth. Moreover, memory research shows that memories of adolescence and early adulthood tend to be stronger than those of subsequent periods in life, a phenomenon that is called the 'reminiscence bump' or 'peak' (Misztal, 2003: 85; Schacter, 1996: 297-8). These are formative periods in life, when many changes occur, which partly explains why memories of *Skipper* are more salient than those of later fiction.

A third, broader explanatory factor for the special status of *Skipper* is related to the socio-cultural context. After its days of glory in the Middle Ages, Flanders had been an impoverished region, using French as the language of government and culture. From the 1950s, Flanders became more prosperous and Flemish nationalism led to the gradual change of Belgium from a unitary to a federal state with a high degree of regional autonomy. This process was accompanied by a growing sense of cultural pride, not in the least among the broadcasters who deliberately aimed to educate the Flemings and to make them familiar with their cultural heritage (Van den Bulck, 2001: 53-69). In terms of fiction, this led to an emphasis on domestic drama, mostly period drama based on literary classics and showing the life of the common Flemish people (Dhoest, 2003 & 2004a). As French had been the language of culture for centuries, the very fact that the BRT broadcast in Dutch (the official language in Flanders) was significant and emancipating (Fleerackers, 1978: 124-5). The abovementioned dual standard of broadcasting was also culturally significant, for it was the result of a dispute - 'the battle of the lines' - and the deliberate resistance of the broadcasters to commercial and cultural 'French imperialism' (Anthierens, 1964: 47).

In this cultural context, *Skipper* was an important programme because it was Flemish and popular: it showed common, Flemish people in an everyday setting and speaking Dutch with a recognisable Flemish accent. This explains the stress on recognition, realism and ordinariness in viewer responses, noted above. The image of small-village Flanders was deemed recognisable, as it showed common people 'as they are' - or rather: as they were. In the rapidly modernising society of the 1950s, it is not surprising that viewers liked this image of a world quickly disappearing. Indeed, *Skipper* was often openly old-fashioned and frankly reactionary, for instance when skipper Matthias protests against Mathilde buying soup at the door, commenting: 'Those modern women, they'd rather be lazy than tired'. In another scene, Marieke complements the neighbour, Mrs. Krielemans, on the amount of cooking books she owns. Mme Krielemans replies: 'A woman can never

know too much about cooking'. This old-fashioned image prompts critic Willy Courteaux to comment:

It was the ideal image of the Flemish living room. The Flemish living room was Catholic, to start, and petit bourgeois, cosy, shut off from the world outside. It couldn't be bothered, disturbed, let alone shocked, so it all had to be dreadfully respectable (Courteaux, 1995)

However old-fashioned the image of Flanders shown in *Skipper*, it did emancipate the Flemings in terms of validating their cultural identity. As mentioned above, the mere fact of showing common Flemish people was a big change from the domination by French culture. Moreover, the fact that it was simultaneously and communally viewed by a large part of the Flemish population made it into a truly (sub-) national experience. [\[10\]](#)

Conclusion

Of the thirty-two domestic series and serials broadcast on Flemish public television between 1953 and 1989, *Skipper near Mathilde* is best remembered and evokes the fondest memories among viewers. As this research shows, this isn't in spite of, but rather because of the fact it was the earliest series they saw. While these fond memories can be partly attributed to the qualities of the programme, which was perceived as 'good' by most, the context of early viewing seems equally important as an explanatory factor. This period was 'special', in terms of personal viewer biography, of media history and of Flemish (sub-) national emancipation. *Skipper* has undeniably become part of collective memory, being remembered indiscriminately across class and gender as the identification of the quotes above shows.

Still, it is important to remember that memories of *Skipper* are constructed from the present and are structured according to a before-after opposition. The memories of this nostalgic series are in themselves highly nostalgic, as they are linked to the general sense throughout the interviews that 'before things were better', and in particular, 'television was better back then'. This is typical for popular memory that, according to Samuel, 'deals in broad-brushed contrasts between "now" and "then", "past" and "present".' (1994: 5). With Edgerton we can add that popular memory has 'less to do with accuracy per se than using the past as a kind of communal, mythic response to current controversies, issues, and challenges' (2001: 5). In viewer memories, *Skipper* also acquires somewhat of a mythic status. Although (or perhaps oppositely: because) it was never rebroadcast, it is used as a shorthand reference to early Flemish TV drama, epitomising an entire period but losing much of its specificity in the process. Rather than a set of clear memories, *Skipper* mobilises a blur of associations, including a particular image of Flanders (the cosiness of small-village life), a viewing experience (communal viewing), and a whole era (after-war reconstruction and prosperity, the wonders of technological progress exemplified by television). This is an example of memory work whereby oral history texts voice collective imagination, as identified by Kuhn: '... the

stories often take on a timeless, mythic quality which grows with each retelling. This mythicisation works at the levels of both personal and collective memory and is key in the production, through memory, of collective identities.' (Kuhn, 2000: 192). Viewed in this way, the central position of *Skipper* in viewer memories is an indication of its position in collective memory, which, in turn, suggests it may have played a role in the formation of Flemish collective identity from the 1950s.

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Notes

[1] Flanders is the Dutch-language community in Belgium, with about 6 million inhabitants. It has its own public broadcasting institution, the VRT ('Vlaamse Radio en Televisie', formerly called BRT and BRTN). Both the VRT and its French-language (Wallonia) counterpart RTBF originated in the same unitary institution, the NIR-INR, in 1953. However, as to content they have operated independently from the start, and they have gradually lost all structural links to become separate institutions in 1977.

[2] Thanks to Leen Engelen and to the editors and reviewers of [Particip@tions](#) for comments on earlier versions of this article.

[3] For an excellent overview of this field, see Klinger 1997.

[4] For a similar study using cinema viewer memories see Richards 2003.

[5] I would like to express my gratitude to the participants of the 2003-2004 Media Culture Seminar at the K.U.Leuven for their help with the interviews.

[6] There was one earlier attempt at serial drama, *De familie Blutts* (*The Blutts Family*, NIR, 1954), but it wasn't appreciated and it was cancelled after 13 episodes. As none of my interviewees have seen it or remember it, it isn't further discussed.

[7] The interview transcripts are literal translations by the author.

[8] More on quality assessments of early Flemish TV drama in Dhoest 2004b.

[9] For an elaborate discussion of such interview dynamics, see Seiter 1990.

[10] While not a state itself, Flanders clearly has the cultural and political characteristics of a nation, which makes it a sub-nation or a 'stateless nation'. This being said, the process of Flemish nation-building is contested, mostly because of its connections with the political extreme-right.

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