

**Ann Julienne**

"Television and the 'C'-word"

Why “the C-word”? Because we in the television business are repeatedly told that certain words must never be said. And not just the C- word:

I early on learned never to use the E-word.

That was when I joined the start-up team at France5, formerly called la Cinquième, which, when we launched in 1994, had been initially called an EDUCATIONAL channel. But we quickly realized that the E-word meant BORING to viewers – or at least that’s what we were told by Experts.

Experts, that’s an e-word too!

Then of course we all know about the F-word. But surprisingly, the F-word is ok in television!

Nobody worries if we talk about Family programming!

But seriously, back to the C-word, which is why we’re all here.

Can Television and Culture be said in the same sentence.

Yes? (???)

Well... Yes, but.

First of all what *is* culture?

It is, in fact, a lot of things, but what do we mean by culture on television? I think if I asked each of you in this room, I would get a lot of different answers. And, also if I asked the next question. That is, should television air so-called “cultural” shows if nobody watches them.

An example:

This summer, France2, the flagship generalist public channel in France, aired an opera –live - from the Chorégie d’Orange, the oldest and one of the better known music festivals in France. It was a wonderfully scheduled primetime evening. Prior to the actual live opera there was a warm-up with a very popular tv presenter who has a series about crimes called *Bring in the Accused*. You know the type of series I’m talking about – a host leads you through the stages of a famous crime and the ensuing trial, with archives, and interviews and all the gory details. In this case the “show” was called *Bring in LaTraviata*. It used the same style as the crime series to explain everything about La Traviata and included a delightful portrait of the soprano Patrizia Ciofi.

It was a good way to set the stage, so to speak, for the live performance and to draw in viewers even if they weren't opera lovers. It was very cleverly done and worked beautifully.

The next day France 2 proudly proclaimed that the number of viewers who watched the opera live would have filled up the outdoor theatre of Orange one hundred and thirty times! Imagine – that many people watched the opera live over and above those lucky ones in the audience, a full house. And thanks to the broadcast, a hundred and thirty full houses.

Now, that's the problem. 1.4 million people watched the documentary which was like an episode of the crime show, then the numbers dropped a little to 1.2 million for the opera. So, despite the fact that that represented a hundred and thirty performances in the Orange theatre, it was only a 9% market share, which isn't good for France 2 for a Saturday night. To give you an idea – France 2 averages between a 20 and a 25% market share on Saturday night.

Personally, I approve of the decision to air this kind of event. I think it is part of the role of public television – not to mention the fact that I happen to be a fan of the O-word, opera. But, you could argue, and many of my colleagues do, that the viewers pay a licence fee, and that this kind of event, which is very expensive to broadcast, isn't fair. That only an élite is interested in opera so it uses the licence fee inappropriately.

If that's the case, let's go back to defining "culture". I'll tell you a little anecdote. It's actually more about defining when television is educational, as opposed to cultural, but it illustrates what my point is going to be.

About seven or eight years ago, I was at a conference that was being held in Germany. It's a yearly conference devoted to science and specialist factual television and draws producers and broadcasters together to discuss, in-depth, content, style and trends in the field. It is in a different country every year, and we invite prominent people to give the keynote speech. That year it was Professor Hubert Markl, the president of the Max Planck Institute, among other prestigious activities. He is a brilliant and very touching man and his talk about the role of television in the way it deals with science programming, in particular, was very compelling.

As I said, he was addressing a roomful of television people, but he only mentioned one actual television channel; he said it was the only one he could cite favourably for the way it brought knowledge to its viewers. It was France 5, my channel.

Well you can imagine that I was very proud, and in fact a little embarrassed that my channel was the only one that he felt he should mention. I went up to him afterwards to thank him and I asked him why. Because, he said, every programme France 5 aired left something for the viewers to reflect on. I was surprised and gave a few examples of programmes I thought didn't really fall in to that category. But he pointed out that the reason they did was because they were scheduled in such a way that they were in a context that would broaden the

viewers' horizons. He meant that everything the channel aired it did so for a reason and that the people at the channel never forgot that their remit was educational. And that was true.

Now that gave me food for thought. And I believe that we should approach the way we perceive Culture on television in much the same way. In an all encompassing way.

Milan Kundera defines culture as such – I quote:

“Culture is the memory of a people, the collective consciousness, the continuity of history, the way we think and live... People survive changes in political régimes. But if you rid a nation of its culture, that is, of its memory and originality, you condemn it to death.”

To me then, culture is as much the identity of a country as it is the higher art forms. It is the arts, of course: art, music, literature, cinema, plays – history – science dare I say religion. But it is also ... entertainment and comedy.

Television – that ubiquitous box, or rather flat screen on the wall now, is, whether you like it or not, in everyone's home in Europe. (Actually, it is still very frequent in France to hear people say they don't even have a television set at home – as if watching television were akin to picking your nose).

True, television is to a big extent a leveller. There is at least one American series that everyone in this room has seen at least one episode of. I'm sure! And that's not necessarily bad. Some American series are actually good. So yes, it's a leveller, but television is also a perfect vehicle, as Kundera said, to keep the collective memory and originality of a nation alive.

Television is also something else. Here in Europe, we are lucky to have strong public service television companies with remits that actually set out a number of missions that we must fulfill. And we do. And despite the difficulties, we get good results. I earlier pointed out that the Traviata event rated a miserable 9%. But recently on France 2, the same channel, the environmental documentary HOME by Yann Artus-Bertrand rated a whopping 33% on a Friday evening. Nine million viewers. A documentary ! in primetime ! So Culture does work. Even on commercial channels. A couple of years ago an adaptation of the Count of Monte-Cristo was aired on our biggest commercial channel in France, TF1. I don't remember the ratings, but everybody watched it (even those people who don't have a television set).

I'm actually very optimistic about Culture and television. In this time where the growth of niche channels and other media means the traditional channels are losing viewers, all that means is that viewers are going to the niche channels that air the kind of programme they want to see. And that includes Opera! History and documentary channels are as abundant in the new offers as cooking and lifestyle channels – of course cooking is culture, and I can tell you I have very much been enjoying the culture of Finnish food for the past few days.

Thank you

