

Anna Woźniak
(Warszawa, Poland)

WATCHING TELEVISION IN CONTEMPORARY POLISH VILLAGES

Today's cultural landscape of polish villages is shaped definitely by media, especially television. The discussion about the role of this medium in creating culture by showing different cultural patterns and lifestyles is very important. Although some question its cultural mission, arguing that its nature compels viewers to passivity, others note that because there are many interpretations of its programs or film it proves that watching TV is an active process.

In my presentation I would like to show why polish soap operas and telenovels were important factors in creating villages' cultural landscape. After making an anthropological research (2005–2008) I observed that the most popular of TV programs are serials: soap operas and telenovels. I wondered why they had been watched by almost all members of local communities and what they really had meant for them?

Keywords: television, active viewing, TV serials, folk culture, tradition, mediatized tradition, popular culture.

To answer questions mentioned above it's important firstly to find out what does differentiate the auditoriums? In my opinion watching TV is an active process. Active paradigm assumes inter alia that the place of residence, social status have an impact on different interpretation of media content. There is no one, single auditorium – there are many. A resident of a large city will have different preferences than the viewer from the village. In other words, they may read the message differently. It depends on local culture how viewers understand and use TV programs. They produce own meanings of popular culture's contents. Cultural patterns which comes from the local tradition are important factors in the process of watching TV. The context of viewing is an excellent field of research for ethnography and culture anthropology.

It is surprising that so far, little is known about television audiences living on the countryside. Usually one hears or reads that its tastes are immature, that they prefer programs with low artistic level, and uncritically consume media products. It is therefore, in principle, reduced to the level of a mass audience, which is sometimes judged harshly and clearly, as devoid of taste. Rural viewers easily assign the role of 'an idle observer'. In common opinion, they do not deserve to be called an equal (by having the specific competencies) recipient, because as critics want they accept everything what the TV stations offer.

Why is this happening? Well, probably because the knowledge about rural auditoriums is speculative, not supported by detailed qualitative research. Not much you can learn about it from audience statistics. Information based on the reports that the rural population is the core of the television audience does not answer any questions. That's why there is a need of penetrating the rural environment, doing the analysis of socio-cultural backgrounds of receiving TV programs. This will help not only in drawing a place of TV in the countryside landscape, but also allows to discover the cultural needs of village's inhabitants.

This task can be accomplished by using ethnographic method of research (an interview and an observation), as it allows to capture many aspects of each phenomena. In this case it will be who, under what circumstances, and why watch television. Its usefulness in the field of media studies was confirmed by the British and American studies (e. g. David Morley (4), James Lull (3)) in which there was shown the relationship of cultural and social implications of the use of television. The way of watching television showed the power relations within families revealed by the unwritten rules and patterns of behavior.

British researcher Paul Willis notes that «watching TV is considered as the archetype of self-indulgence – comfortable lying on the couch and passively staring at the screen» [6, p. 107]. But next he definitively states «[w]atching television is a process

very active one» [6, p. 107]. Active audience theorists do not ask «what media do to people, but focus on the description of what people do with the media» [2, p. 298].

Audience research conducted by standard quantitative methods are not capable of penetrating the context of the reception of media content. As it turns out, the context is extremely important for understanding not only the criteria of selection favourite programs, but also it often allows to explain the diversity of interpretation. The activity is expressed in the field of symbolic interpretation of TV messages. Ien Ang, a Dutch researcher says that the audience is now «fragmented, individualized, dispersed and can not be described any more as unified mass market, the social whole and enabled collectively engaged in a clearly defined act of watching» [(1, p. 67].

The material, which will be appealed in this article was collected in 2005–2008 in Poland (Lublin voivodeship and Warsaw voivodeship). I conducted field research using ethnographic methods (depth interviews and observation). The main problem was to find out what is the role and importance of television in socio-cultural life of the villages. The selection of the villages was carried out according to the type of employment prevailing in the area. It were communities of farmers whose livelihood was based on work on farms and communities of non-farmers working in industry. Such a choice was the result of the assumption that the system of work and related life style affects different broadcast reception. The local communities I visited were characterized according to their own: frequency of contacts of intra- and outside group, openness to change, specific vision of the world.

Selected villages in Lublin voivodeship have been struggling for many years with the problem of migration. Young people leave family homes en masse to find work. Those who stayed were older people, and couples (or only women) with school-age children (primary school and middle school). If someone in the family (usually a grandparent) has granted a pension becomes a guarantor of her financial security. The families in which more than one person receives a monthly transfer of funds, they said they are rich. In those villages, only a few people could say that they felt good in a market economy (for example they had private agriculture companies).

Lack of economic stability was expressed in the conviction of the prevailing poverty and lack of prospects. However, possessing both fixed income families and those without access to cash monthly lead a similar lifestyle. It must be noted that most complains were about limitations on access to culture. They claimed that they do not have money for visiting cinemas or theaters.

In many cases the most active lifetime, associated with participation in cultural events, was a period of school education. Elders spoke with nostalgia about the days when the state sponsored tickets to cinemas, theaters. Today, young parents, as they emphasize, hardly pay for school trips. Often educational institutions subsidize such projects.

The rhythm of life in villages was designated by seasons of the year, going to and coming back from work, catholic holidays, but it was also adapted to television schedule. Inhabitants of villages planned their activities to catch the hourly emissions of their favourite TV series, entertainment programs and TV news. On average television accompanied the viewers few hours a day (about 4). The most popular television genres (among all age groups) are Polish TV soap operas and telenovels. You could say that it is not surprising and only confirms the assumption of low level of viewers. However, whether such claims are entitled? So what does it mean an «active soap operas viewer»? What did influence the preferences and reception of television programs among rural families?

Active viewing it is assumption that people produce meanings and this process is up to the context. In which it was expressed during my research? – in discussing in families and among friends about watched programs and films, on undermining reviews, comparing the content of TV series with the local system of values, accepting or rejecting the cultural patterns promoted in television. On the Polish countryside the most important are local values stemming from the tradition: frugality, cleverness – resourcefulness, familiarity, respect for work, established forms of cooperation among neighbours, and they affected the reception of TV series.

In my interpretation there is a connection between the narrative structure of serials and old fairy tells. In the past listening to stories was an important part of life – it helped to understand who we were and also pointed on the rules of culture. Nowadays

it is television which tells the never ending story. It is different story, because the world has changed and the contemporary tradition is different – it is ‘mediatized’. But it does not ruin the most important values of local cultures. TV series – today’s fairy tells teach how to behave in modern world with respect to old customs and how to ‘use’ traditions from different part of country or even the world, if there is not enough support from the local tradition in explaining social and cultural change.

What does it mean ‘mediatized tradition’? John B. Thomson [5] points out that tradition have been changed in the era of mass communication. The media breathed new life into tradition: it became different when interpersonal contacts lost their importance because the media transmission started to be an inherent component of life. It not strictly associated with one place and time – it flows in media transmission. It could be easily changed. People can accept tradition from other parts of the world. It is possible to choose and invent new traditions. Today’s tradition is associated with cultural and social changes.

After I discovered that serials (telenovels and soap operas) explained viewers social and cultural changes gave answers how to face the problems of everyday life, I wondered why it were not any other TV programs (for example TV news) which could have done it? I think it was because the reasonable part of rural audience did not understand contemporary, constantly changing world (e. g. new social movements, behaviours, economy, the role of politics in their life) and what they found in serials was quick advise and help. It was serials’ simplicity and narrative structure which caused that they described better world than any other type of TV programs. Considering the fact that the most popular series had respect to the tradition and did not undermine its importance in social and cultural life, the viewers, although critically, indicated that it is one of the reasons of their popularity.

My observations and interviews conducted in Polish villages showed that the content of television reception is associated with many spheres of life. Listening to viewers’ talks, comments during watching TV gave me a chance to see that the peoples experience, traditions, in which they were raised, models of behaviour are important factors which diversify the audiences. The place of

reception: home, neighbourhood, peer group also had a significant impact on creating a variety of meanings. Of course, the catalogue of factors that have a direct impact on preferences and reception of programs must include age, sex, education, occupation. It is also associated with social and economic status, and smaller or bigger attachment to the traditions (also religious – Catholic) ¹.

Conclusion

My research showed that because of the correlation of factors: social (including, inter alia, undermine existing authority), economic (including poverty, lack of stability in life), but also cultural (lack of alternative sources of culture), television played the most important role on Polish countryside. It shaped and created cultural needs. I pointed also that television, especially one of its genres, serials (soap opera and telenovel), was a rural primary source of entertainment and information. It also played an important role in the processes of socialization. In my opinion we can say that rural life in Polish villages is ‘serialized’ ² but watching TV series is an active process: they were discussed, criticized, commented and the content was referred to local values and tradition.

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Endnotes

¹ The research results carried out by this method relate to the micro level and are not a basis for generalization.

² ‘Serialization’ is a dimension of ‘mediatization’.