

XVth French-language summer university for young and future professionals in the field of journalism

“Should journalists talk about the past?”, 13 - 30 September 2000 at the CUEJ (Strasbourg)

Transeuropéennes (Paris), jointly organised with The University Centre for Journalism Studies (CUEJ) and ARTE. With the participation of La Maison de l'Image ; with the support of: French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Council of Europe, Robert Bosch Stiftung, European Foundation of Culture, City of Strasbourg, Alsace Regional Council, Lower-Rhine General Council, Open Society Institutes (South-East sub programme).

Thematic presentation

The summer university jointly organised with the University centre for journalism studies and ARTE focused on investigative journalism, and, in its relationship with practices of inquiry, on documentary film. What need is there, for a journalist, to carry out inquiries into the past? Should journalists leave the past to historians? What are the skills and techniques required for a job that has to do with verifying information, exploiting archives and making use of testimony? All these questions, along with those having to do with the existing or still-to-be-established link between journalists and the scientific community, were dealt with. Further, the relationship between investigative journalism and documentary film was the object of critical analysis, in close collaboration with the teams from ARTE.

In the final analysis, working on the past implies that the journalist or documentary filmmaker confront still unclarified opinion, opaque, concealed histories, that have often been manipulated by the powers that be. How is one to acquire the requisite critical posture with regard to official historiography and stand up to the inevitable pressures when one wants to tackle head-on national stereotypes that are bound up with history and collective memory.

The theme of the relationship to the past was treated in issue 18 of the international cultural review *Transeuropéennes*, which was handed out to the students as a reference guide.

General conclusions

This summer university was attended by twentyseven students, coming from all the

countries of Southeast Europe (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, Turkey, FR Yugoslavia - Serbia / Montenegro). The group was characterised by the broad age-span (ranging from twenty to thirty), by a comparatively small number of students from the countries of the former Yugoslavia (because of the difficulty in recruiting French-speaking participants) and, on the other hand, by a significant group of Albanian-speaking students. Their level of professional competency was generally good, even excellent in some cases, though there were obviously regrettable differences in terms of levels of involvement, both in the profession and in the summer university itself.

The lack of deontology in some cases, which led those participants to merely read reality through the prism of their own ideology, was detrimental to the work of the group. The everincreasing difficulty in recruiting young Frenchspeaking professionals, particularly in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, and the overall decrease in the level of French - leading to a sometimes detrimental vagueness in expression - is particularly regrettable.

Partners and speakers

The summer university was hosted by the CUEJ. However, the partnership with this institution turned out to be difficult. Restricted to providing classrooms and lending material to carry out investigations, the institution's involvement was lacking. The welcome was not always especially warm and contacts virtually non-existent. Collaboration with ARTE, more restricted than in previous years, was limited to co-operation with the channel's documentary section - which turned out to be extremely fruitful and enriching. The documentary filmmakers contacted by ARTE presented high quality works, perfectly illustrating the summer university's theme. Both the screening of the documentaries and the discussion which were subsequently held with the filmmakers caught the interest and provided the students with food for thought. Certain approaches, such as that of Ferenc Moldovanyi, also held a particular appeal because of their very personal approach and aesthetic qualities.

The speakers came from various European countries (principally Germany, Great Britain, Belgium, Hungary). Those who were not familiar with Transeuropéennes showed great interest for the summer universities project and appreciated the quality of the exchanges with the students and the way in which they interacted with one another. Their participation often apparently provided them with an opportunity to examine their own work from a new perspective.

Journalists and official history

The objective of the theme ("Should journalists talk about the past?") was to get participants to question the need for a critical posture with regard to official historiography and dominant discourses, by inciting them to tackle national history-related stereotypes and by rousing their suspicion with regard to the possibilities of historiographical manipulation practised by states or communities.

From the Franco-German case to the situation in the Balkans

This subject was dealt with through a combination of theoretical and practical approaches. The theoretical aspects of the question of the past were raised with the help of examples. World War II in the mirror of Alsacian memory served as a first case study, in the context of a course on the history of the Alsacian region and a reflection around the Schirmeck memorial project. Two major debates, which shook German society in the 1990s were also brought up to illustrate what is at issue when the past is brought up: the debate launched by the speech made by German author Martin Walser when he was awarded the German Booksellers' Peace Prize in 1998, and that stemming from the exhibition put on by the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung on the crimes committed by the Wehrmacht during World War II.

This first phase took up approximately the first week of the summer university. It made it possible to situate the debate, and to bring out what is at stake with the help of examples drawn from French and German history. In the course of these sessions, the students were confronted with various notions which had to be clarified and linked together: notions such as History, (collective) memory, remembering, but also the politics of memory, commemorations, the responsibility / abuse / work of memory, justice, forgetting, forgiveness, and so on.

In the course of the summer university's second phase, all these notions were applied to the specific situation of the Balkans through a questioning of the transformations and wars of the past ten years. This task was carried out in two different ways: on the one hand through the presence of journalists having worked on location, and on the other hand, through the students' presentation of inquiries regarding the past, they themselves carried out in their entourages.

From investigative journalism to documentary film

In terms of media tools, the first two weeks of the summer university were devoted to the role of the written press in memory-related issues, and especially in the role of investigative journalism in shedding light on less glorious - often hidden or forgotten - episodes of (national) history. The examples studied had the further goal of nourishing reflection on the role of the journalist and that of the historian in shedding light on the past and in the dissemination of knowledge in this domain.

The last part of the programme was devoted to the work of the documentary filmmaker in relation to work on the past. Many examples of this type of work were shown, consisting either of retracing certain episodes of a forgotten or repressed history (*Sinagos*), painful history (*Marcourt*) and complex history (*Suicide of a Nation*) were presented, in most cases in the presence of the filmmaker. The question of the relationship between the documentary filmmaker and the historian in the production of works such as these was also addressed, notably through the study on the conditions of production of documentaries in the former East-bloc countries done by Jacques Rupnik for the BBC in the 1980s and by Jochen Staadt on the revelations of the SED archives.

An ill-explored field

Generally speaking, dealing with the question of the past and its weight in western and Balkanic societies was not self-evident for the students. They discovered with surprise,

through the discussion of the history of Alsace and more generally that of World War II and the trauma it wreaked in France and Germany, the presence of issues still weighing heavily today on the societies of western Europe, and which come up in similar terms in their own countries. This discovery led to two increased awareness on two different counts. The first had to do with the weight of war trauma and the painful episodes of history, above all when they are not dealt with through an active and critical effort of memory. The second had to do with a more complex vision of West-European societies, perceived not only as havens of peace and prosperity, but as also dealing with a painful past.

The theoretical courses were not always duly appreciated. Some students had a hard time grasping the meaning of an example coming from outside the context of the Balkans, and of finding their way in a comparative mode of thinking. Nevertheless, the example of Alsace, and more generally the wounds of World War II in France, Germany and Belgium made it possible to undertake a more distanced reflection with regard to the situation in the Balkans. They provided certain students with the distance necessary for them to be able to analyse their own reality - and, in particular, certain forms of nationalist behaviour - in a more theoretical and dispassionate light. These examples opened new perspectives for the students, who in turn questioned the time necessary to undertake such an effort of memory in their region. They also made it possible to lift certain taboos and to engage debates on sensitive topics. The experience of the concretely perceptible French-German reconciliation in Strasbourg, evinced by the lack of a tangible border between the two countries, further nourished this thinking.

Awareness of the other

Once the question of the Balkans had been raised in this context - thanks, notably, to the film *Suicide of a Nation*, taking apart the logic of war with clinical precision - a realisation took place. The participants observed the tenacious strength of national stereotypes and to what extent they did not know - or erroneously knew - their neighbours. The exchanges brought on by the different presentations enabled everyone to become aware of the historical sensitivity of the others. Thus, the observation was made that in spite of the divergent readings of certain historical episodes, it was possible to cross-examine the perspectives of a narrative, and to admit that the same events be examined in a different yet coordinated fashion. In this regard, the documentary *Sinasos*, dealing with the forced displacement of populations between Turkey and Greece in the 1920s, on the basis of a village in Anatolia, served as a catalyst for this realisation.

The analysis of the spiral of events leading to war and the resulting collective traumas were one of the high points of the session. The effort of sensitising around the question of historical objectivity and the need for questioning one's own a priori with regard both to others and to history was favourable received by the students. Though the critical reflection on national stereotypes was carried out with a great deal of finesse, the predominance of historical interpretations influenced by conspiracy theory and a very powerful anti-Americanism - or even anti-Westernism - frequently accompanied by a somewhat simplistic discourse on globalisation and the West's desire to impose its model (presented, without nuance, as if it were cohesive - was nevertheless obvious.

Not only did the participants have an acute feeling of a Balkanic “specificity”, but also a pronounced complementary tendency to consider the West like a single unit, functioning on the basis of to a single system. Thus, the majority of the students thought of Western-European / Balkan relations in terms of antagonism.

In the course of the summer university, the students discovered a new reality regarding their region, but were not always prepared to take the step toward questioning the individual responsibilities at work in these processes.

In search of a dynamic

As in all summer universities, very important exchanges took place outside of the classrooms, during informal discussions between students. The very strong friendships which were made in the course of these weeks made it possible for the students to overcome their community’s prejudices toward other communities often perceived as antagonistic and to envisage the other from a different angle. From this point of view, there can be no doubt that these three weeks played an extremely positive role for many participants.

With the exception of a small group, there was a high level of participation and attendance. Though relations within the group were very warm and friendly and though the general atmosphere was excellent, the students nonetheless obviously had a certain amount of difficulty organising themselves when they had to engage in group work, especially in doing the Schirmeck investigation. In spite of the spirit of initiative and the high level of mobilisation of several individuals, a certain inertia stemming from the group put a brake on initiatives.

Upstream production, downstream production

In the framework of the summer universities, the students were assigned two practical concrete tasks. The point of these tasks was, on the one hand, to have the students carry out an inquiry on an aspect of the past in their entourage before leaving their respective homes, and, on the other hand, once in Strasbourg, to carry out an inquiry on the Schirmeck memorial project.

Regarding the first point, all the students - with a few very rare exceptions - carried out the assigned task. They made use of very different supports, from video to texts, photographs, CD Roms and slides. These works were to be carried out in a critical spirit. The objective was to analyse an episode of the past in their own entourage in a personal way. However, this critical spirit was exerted in a very unequal manner. Many works were genuinely interesting. They showed an original approach: worthy of mention was the very moving panel of photographs done by a student from Kosovo, presenting what was at stake in the media coverage and the possible manipulation of the Racak massacre; a reflection on the heritage of the Communist past in Romania in the form of a small video film; the short film made by a student from Kosovo on how those who went “missing” during the war weigh heavily in the Kosovar society today; a reflection in the form of an exposé on the Ottoman Empire and its millet system... Other works, on the other hand, were unable to distinguish themselves from a stereotypical vision of history, to the glory of the nation, often even yielding to a “folklore” temptation.

Despite the variable quality of the works presented - their perspective being more or less critical - the quality of the debates which they inspired and the genuine interest that they provoked amongst the students demonstrated the value of the exercise, to which more time could have been devoted. The discussion following up on the presentation were amongst the most stimulating of the summer university.

The on-location inquiry work around the Schirmeck memorial project in Alsace during the war constituted the illustration of what is at stake in a politics of memory and should have led to a critical reflection on the nature of the project, and what led to it being done more than fifty years after the end of the war, as well as its chances of attaining its objectives. A visit was conducted on location the very day the Association of the friends of the memorial was constituted, when the leading protagonists were present. A presentation had already been made by the person in charge of the project at the General Council of the Lower Rhine.

Yet in spite of the warm welcome they received from the people who had participated in the memorial project, the students showed precious little spirit of initiative in their inquiry. Instead of dealing with the issues linked to implementing a politics of memory in Alsace, the inquiry took a very descriptive turn, lack any genuine critical questioning. The two inquiries they produced at the end of the three weeks in the form of an article and a video film turned out to be somewhat disappointing. In their defence, it must be added that they had only an extremely limited amount of time to spend of the exercise.

Synthesis prepared by Catherine Perron

Speakers

Alain Chanel, Director of the CUEJ, Strasbourg ; *André Dartevelle*, Documentary filmmaker, Belgium ; *Jean-Louis English*, Journalist, director of France 3 Alsace ; *Jean-Marie Haeffelé*, Editor of the newspaper L'Alsace, Mulhouse ; *Georges Heck*, Director of Vidéo les beaux jours, Maison de l'image, Strasbourg ; *Jacques Laurent*, Manager of the documentary team, ARTE, Strasbourg ; *Tihomir Loza*, Documentary filmmaker, London ; *Antoine Maurice*, Journalist, La Tribune de Genève, Geneva ; *Ferenc Moldovanyi*, Documentary filmmaker, Budapest ; *Jacques Rupnik*, Research director, Centre for International Studies and Research (CERI) Paris ; *Jochen Staadt*, Political scientist, Otto Suhr Institut, Free University Berlin, Contributor to the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung ; *Chris Stephen*, Journalist, The Scotsman, London, Moscow ; *Jean-Pierre Verdier*, Project leader, Schirmeck Memorial, Lower Rhine General Council ; *Alfred Wahl*, Professor of contemporary history, University of Metz ; *Brigitte Wehland-Rauschenbach*, Philosopher, political scientist, Otto Suhr Institut, Free University Berlin, Berlin ; *Jean-Pierre Worms*, Sociologist, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences sociales, Paris.

Partners and teams

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Notes
