

UN VILLAGE FRANÇAIS. A FRENCH AUTEUR(S) SERIES ON A PUBLIC NETWORK

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ABSTRACT

This article is a case study of the French TV series *Un Village français*, broadcast on France 3 from 2009 to 2017. Based on interviews and observations of the cast and crew members, it attempts to unravel the relationships between writers, producers, directors and broadcasters within the French television industry. First, some particularities of television production in France are briefly addressed. These include: the limited number of channels commissioning original TV series;

the still unestablished concept and professional practice of showrunners and the lack of an industrialized process in creating televised serial narratives; and the dominant status of directors, which contributes to the weakened position of TV writers within this economy. The focus of the article is then the pre-broadcast history of the series, from the early stages of its conception to the later stages of its production. *Un Village français* is indeed created by an atypical trio of executive co-producers: a producer (Emmanuel Daucé), a writer (Frédéric Krivine) and a director (Philippe Triboit), championed by a non-executive head producer (Jean-François Boyer). Eventually winning over reluctant channel executives, their stubbornness and ambition was rewarded by prime-time airings on a public channel of what is now widely regarded like a show bearing the marks of authorship. The aim is to understand the creative and economic processes at stake, and their impact on the narrative.

Unlike their counterparts from the US, French TV series are not the heavily marketed products of a billion-dollar industry, but the offspring of a few craftsmen hired by a handful of public and private TV channels¹ (Boutet 2014). The economic fabric of French television is closer to a proto-industrial loom, with a limited number of patrons commissioning specific pieces to craftsmen, rather than an industrial marketplace where competition rules over makers and buyers alike. According to Pierre Zemniak, this situation is unique in Western Europe. France produces the fewest hours of original scripted fiction (897 hours in 2015 against 1,200 in the United Kingdom and 1,800 in Germany), while series imported to France from the U.S. consistently gain more viewers than any domestically produced shows from 2007 to 2014 (Zemniak 2017: 10; 125).

The relative unpopularity of French TV series – while American, British, Danish and Israeli ones are eagerly bought, broadcast, gauged and discussed – can partly be explained by the fact that this artisanal economy produces mostly TV movies, miniseries and procedurals. That is, the domestic French industry concentrates on the production of self-contained stories, making few multi-season serialized narratives that require the cooperation and long-term involvement of several ‘craftsmen’, and which engage the viewer in a long-term relationship with fictional characters (Doury 2011: 171-172). The broadcasters’ strategy is all the harder to comprehend since season-based narratives with several dozens of episodes are easier to sell internationally (Kirschbacher and Stollfuss 2015: 25-26) and thus are of interest to a growing number of producers. Yet French TV channels pay for 80 per cent of the production of TV fictions and were until 2016 forbidden by law to own producing shares or sales rights, which inclined them to prioritise short-term profitability over the financial risks of long-term investment in ongoing series (Zemniak 2017: 128-30).

Over the last two decades, only three prime-time series with open-ended 52-minutes episodes and a recurring ensemble cast have cleared the 50-episodes mark in France: the police and legal drama *Engrenages* (*Spiral*, Canal +, 2005-), the family comedy *Fais pas ci, fais pas ça* (France 2, 2007-2017), and World War 2 drama *Un Village français* (France 3, 2009-2017). Among them, *Un Village français* [UVF] is the only one that has not changed

its lead writer, and has generated the highest number of episodes during the shortest production span: in December 2017, 64 episodes of *Engrenages* and 68 of *Fais pas ci, fais pas ça*² have been broadcast, against a total of 72 for *UVF*, despite the other series having premiered four and two years earlier, respectively.

Yet it took over two years to convince France 3 executives to air its first season: from 2005 to 2008, the pilot episode’s script was in development limbo. The story of a cuckold doctor, an opportunistic business owner, a naive teacher and a sadistic, Nazi-collaborating cop might have looked a poor fit for the public network’s demographic of viewers aged over 60, more used to following the adventures of model citizens and brave families. It seemed unlikely that 3.5 million viewers would tune-in week after week, year after year, to delve into the moral and political ambiguities of Nazi-occupied France.

As a historian and television critic, I have been interested in *UVF* since I heard about the project in 2008. I started reviewing the series in 2012, when its treatment of the 1942 “Rafle du Vel’ d’Hiv” (Vel’ d’Hiv Roundup) convinced me it was a milestone in the evolution of France’s memory of World War 2 and its audio-visual depiction. Through my review, the series’ creators became interested in my work as a historian and television critic, and we started to meet for formal and informal interviews over a couple of years³. This led to the writing of a coffee-table book about the series, its production history and its portrayal of World War 2 (Boutet 2017).

The present article draws upon material assembled for the preparation of that book⁴. It recounts in greater detail the history of how *Un Village français* came to the screen, and what that history reveals of the complex relationship between writers, producers and TV executives in France in the late 2000s. On a broader level, it questions the role, place and even the possibility of *auteur* series on French television, and hopes to show the importance of trust and collaboration when it comes to televisual production⁵.

1 In 2016, only 4 French TV channels broadcast original 52-minutes series: the private audience-leader TF1, the public networks France 2 and France 3 (which order more than half of French TV fiction), the French-German niche channel Arte and the premium cable channel Canal +. The second private French network, M6, chose to concentrate on shorter formats over the recent years but aired a 52-minutes miniseries of 6 episodes in January 2017.

2 The first season of *Fais pas ci, fais pas ça* (12 episodes in 2007) was broadcast in half-hour self-contained episodes of mockumentary on Saturday afternoons on France 2. The second season aired in prime-time with on-going 52-minutes episodes and a straightforward fictional narrative.

3 The detailed list and dates of the interviews conducted can be found at the end of this article. Each interview lasted for one to two hours. Some details were checked by follow-up e-mails and research.

4 Notably, observations of the writing room, the producers’ office, the work on set and the editing room were conducted in May, June and July 2016 and in June 2017 as the seventh and last season of *Un Village français* was created.

5 In the conclusion of his analysis of the French TV industry, Pierre Zemniak points to the lack of cooperation in the workplace as the most detrimental cultural habit to the making of multi-season quality series in France (2017: 185).

1. CONTEXTUALIZATION: THE DELICATE POSITION OF THE FRENCH TV WRITER

The entire history of the French cultural economy⁶ has contributed to undermine the importance of TV writers. Until the 1960s, as in many other European countries, TV fiction was mostly composed of theatrical and literary adaptations of renowned authors. There were thus few chances for writers to create original audio-visual pieces (Bourdon 2001:99-117). Yet in the 1960s and 1970s, with the creation of a second and a third public channel, more fictions had to be produced to fill the new programme schedules. Literary adaptations, period dramas and detective stories were the most popular genres, but few lasted for more than one or two years. The most prestigious programmes, aired in prime-time, were mini-series and TV movies with self-contained storylines, no continuity in the creative teams nor fixed periodicity in the programming (Sauvage and Veyrat-Masson 2014: 156). They were made and considered as cheaper movies by producers, critics and the public alike. In the minds of most French political and cultural leaders, cinema was the true artistic form of audio-visual creation whereas television was mostly commercial, educational at best but with very poor aesthetic value. It was looked upon as mere entertainment, and not as a part of French Culture (Boutet 2014). Until the beginning of the twenty-first century, most fiction writers, directors, actors and technicians worked for television by default, hoping for breaks in the movie industry, theatre or literature (Mille 2006: 161-2).

In the 1980s, French TV executives developed what Jérôme Bourdon calls the “Dallas syndrome” (2008), i.e. a love/hate relationship with, as well as a rather strong inferiority complex towards, imported U.S. TV series, which remained cheaper and more popular than domestic fictions. Moreover, with more than 20 episodes produced per year and striking recurring characters, U.S. TV series were much more present and influential for the viewers than bland and scarce national heroes (Zemniak 2017: 65-6). In their interviews of TV writers conducted at the time, sociologists Sabine Chalvon-Demersay and Dominique Pasquier have found that they had a very ambiguous attitude towards these series, which they deemed mediocre and boring while envying their success (1993: 101-2).

This attitude needs to be understood within its historical context. The rising tide of the Nouvelle Vague by the end of

the 1950s promoted the idea that the director, and not the writer, was the true – and only – auteur of a film (Pasquier and Chalvon-Demersay 1995: 56). This view was shared by Jean d’Arcy, Head of Programming at the RTF (French public television) from 1952 to 1959, and made official by an agreement signed between the RTF and the union of French TV directors in 1963 (Zemniak 2017: 23). Since then, the director usually writes or co-writes the script, hires the actors and technicians, supervises the cinematography and the editing process, i.e. he or she controls every phase of the production and is considered as the artist whose sheer and uncompromising talent bears artistic value and is the focus for public appreciation of the artwork (Chemla 2008). This sense of cinema as a work of art, meaning an individual – not a collective – creation, further undermines the status of the writer since the Nouvelle Vague model implies that “art” happens on the set and in the editing room, but not during the writing phase, considered as mere preparation. Very few French writers ever set foot on a set. The writer(s) of a French TV series or TV movie are paid around 3 per cent of the total production costs, that is to say less than what is spent for food, transportation and other daily expenses during shooting (Zemniak 2017: 96-101).

Within the industry, writers are among the most surveilled members of a production, since every step of their work is read, criticized, modified and eventually approved by both the producers and the channel executives before the shooting can start. This time consuming process is a source of constant frustration and leaves writers with a narrow margin for creative autonomy (Pasquier and Chalvon-Demersay 1995: 107-8). This is even truer in an audio-visual market where a handful of channels produce original TV fiction with extremely precise guidelines, based on the overall assumption that they have to broadcast “unifying stories” to maximise their audience. This belief is supported by the numbers: the most watched French television series from the 1990s to the mid-2000s were procedurals with a strongly moral fix-it-all main character, such as the paternal *Navarro* (TF1, 1989-2007) or *L’Instit* (F2, 1993-2005), the motherly *Julie Lescaut* (TF1, 1992-2014) and the best-friend-type *Joséphine ange gardien* (TF1, 1997-). At the same time, U.S. TV series were ever more widely broadcast on French networks and cable, being intensely admired and discussed by a growing number of people (Zemniak 2017: 33-6). It did not take long before a few French producers decided to make domestic TV series differently. Yet they would have to fight decades-old habits and strong resistance from established norms.

6 The term “cultural economy” instead of “entertainment industry” is itself significant.

2. MAKING AN AUTEUR SERIES

2.1. A fortunate encounter of ambition and goodwill

Emmanuel Daucé was born in 1975, and grew up watching plenty of cinema as well as television (especially HBO TV series). Having earned a diploma from ESSEC, a prominent French business school, in 1998 he entered the most renowned French film school, the FEMIS, where *le film d'auteur* is revered (Desbarats 2016). There he pursued an unusual project: learning how to produce artistically ambitious TV series⁷. He recalls:

I did not want to be stuck in what French cinema was about, that is to say star-filled blockbusters or elitist auteur films for the 'happy few'. I felt that TV series offered a new creative space to think about the world we really live in. (Daucé 2016)

Deeply aware of the common mistake of considering television series as mediocre cinema instead of comparing the medium with comic books and serial novels, he defended in 2002 a master's thesis titled *TV Series Production in France, or the Ephemeral World of Fiction*. Daucé pushed the idea that French TV series should become more ambitious from an economic as well as an artistic point of view. He believed they should exist beyond their first broadcast and should be considered like parts of a catalogue composed of dozens of episodes made to be watched, rewatched and sold abroad (Daucé 2016). This was a bold stance in an economy where broadcasters bore almost 80% of the financial burden of any program but were legally barred from owning shares of all the production rights (Zemniak 2017: 65, 90).

After graduation, Daucé was hired by Jean-François Boyer, then head of the major TV production company TelFrance. "Back then, French TV channels did not want to hear about serialized narratives," Daucé recalls. "Boyer thought I was out of my mind, but he hired me anyway because he is a gambler. He is a real entrepreneur who likes developing new ideas" (Daucé 2016). In 2004, Daucé helped the French soap opera *Plus Belle La Vie* (France 3, 2004-) to be-

come a success⁸, acknowledging the fact that writers, working as a team under the supervision of head writer Olivier Szulzynger, should enjoy complete freedom and not care about marketing polls or even social realism. Yet Daucé and Boyer shared a common ambition of producing more than successful popular entertainment.

They were both inspired by American *auteur* series such as *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993-2005), *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC, 1993-1999), and the many landmark series of HBO.

HBO reinvented codified movie genres, the mafia drama with *The Sopranos*, the western with *Deadwood*, the peplum with *Rome*, because TV series offer time and space to develop a narrative, to show what is hidden, to create a link between the characters and the viewers. I wanted to do the same, but in a French setting. One day I had a flash. We were writing *Plus Belle La Vie* and we found ourselves held by a major problem: we lacked villains. I said to myself that Nazis were the ultimate villains. So I had the idea of a TV series set during the Second World War in France. Because this kind of story is always popular, it was a real *genre* and there were obvious life-and-death situations. As a child, my grandparents constantly told me about 'the war', and I grew up playing with World War 2 plastic soldiers, watching plenty of war films. The TV series format would allow us to tell a story never heard before, because we would have time to recreate everyday life and not only historical events. We could follow ordinary people instead of heroes. At first, my purpose was to tell the story of the entire German occupation, one month per episode. (Daucé 2016)

Daucé chose the historic genre with the idea that it could continue through time, cross borders and appeal to viewers years after its initial broadcast. His ambition was from the beginning to sell the show abroad, at a time when foreign broadcasters showed little interest in French series. Knowing that it is easier to sell a large number of episodes, he dreamt of producing 70 instalments of what he already called "Un village français".

7 Carole Desbarats, who was then headmaster at the FEMIS, remembers how every faculty member was impressed by the project, though many of them highly sceptical. Yet eleven years later, Emmanuel Daucé was called back to the school to create a specific program designed to train future French TV series creators.

8 Airing on France 3 right before prime-time since 2004, *Plus Belle La Vie* is the only French soap opera to become highly popular, and consists of more than 3,300 26-minutes episodes, thanks to a unique industrialized writing and producing process (see Mille 2016).

Frustrated by the lack of responsibility he had at Telfrance, Daucé, then a 30-year-old assistant producer, joined Tetra Media on January 5, 2005 (Daucé 2017). The small producing company had just been bought by Jean-François Boyer. Boyer was immediately convinced by the concept of *UVF* and named Daucé associate producer, in charge of developing new series (Boyer 2016). A few months earlier, the public channel France 3 had issued a call for innovative series of 52-minute episodes. The window would close by the end of January 2005.

The clock was ticking. The structure of the French television industry makes it practically impossible to develop a series without sealing a “writing convention” with a broadcaster, because it provides the writer and the producer a commitment for financial investment from the TV channel itself and from the CNC (Centre National du Cinéma et de l’image animée), a public administration that provides grant to the entire French audio-visual industry (Zemniak 2017: 84-6). It is for this reason that all French TV series are written according to the expectations and more or less official guidelines of a specific TV channel (Pasquier and Chalvon-Demersay 1995: 107-8). France 3 appeared to be the best match for *UVF*: as a public channel, it wanted to educate its audience and glorify French heritage, with a strong preference for non-Parisian settings. With more than half of its viewers over the age of 60 (according to Mediamétrie), the broadcaster was receptive to period dramas.

But neither Daucé nor Boyer were writers. They needed someone who could turn this idea into the ambitious *auteur* series they had in mind. When he was a student, Daucé worked as a script reader for France Télévisions, and in 2003 he read “one of the best scenarios ever” (Daucé 2017), *Nom de Code DP*, the story of a spy undercover in an Islamic terrorist organization planning an attack on Brussels. It was written by Frédéric Krivine. Boyer knew him well, since he was the creator of the successful police drama series *P.J.* (France 2, 1997-2009), which was produced by Telfrance (Boyer 2016).

P.J. was a “semi-serialized procedural” (Cornillon 2014: 5-6), with a narrative structure comparable to *E.R.* (NBC, 1994-2009): main storylines were closed within the episode, while secondary plots, usually of a sentimental nature, went on. Those complex storylines were the product of what was a very unusual writing process in France at the time, “writing workshops” where writers helped to develop one another’s ideas, shared the copyrights for generating the scripts. Knowing that semi-serialized procedurals of the 1990s had allowed American *auteurs* to improve their personal style while writing for others, and then develop more personal projects

in the 2000s, Daucé wanted to initiate the same evolution in France. He and Boyer agreed that, if Krivine got on board to write *UVF*, they would name him associate executive producer. They wanted to afford more autonomy, but also more responsibility, to writers during the creative process. In their mind, the key to quality, innovation, and hopefully success, was sharing the work, the risks and the benefits (Boyer 2016, Daucé 2016).

Only a couple of weeks left before the call’s deadline, the three men held a meeting to discuss their options for a pitch. Krivine was hooked by Daucé’s concept:

I was interested by the challenge of telling the story of people who were not strongly politically involved during World War 2, who were not open collaborators nor members of the resistance, that is to say 95 per cent of the French population. I also perceived immediately that creating a TV series of 70 episodes would allow me to go deep into all the nuances of the human kaleidoscope, while exploring the most dramatic and paradoxical time period of recent history. I wanted to write an ensemble show, and I was excited by the concept of recreating the German Occupation over dozens of hours instead of a mere 90-120 minutes as cinema had done so many times. (Krivine 2017)

Krivine was also attracted by the idea of being co-producer, but was already committed to several other writing projects; he would not have time to develop the concept for such an ambitious series on such short notice. So Daucé wrote a few pages of the script himself and submitted these to France 3, highlighting how *UVF* would accord with the network’s editorial inclinations: a French story, a popular genre, a small village, ordinary people, a war everybody remembers or has heard and read about. In competition with dozens of other projects, *UVF* was awarded a writing convention in February 2005.

2.2. Artists vs. patrons, or, the question of the economic viability of an auteur series

With a signed writing convention, a status of co-executive producer, and his other projects completed or cancelled, Krivine cleared his schedule to work full-time on *UVF*. Yet he did not want to be the only artist facing two producers at the table, so he created his own production company, Terego. Joining him in the enterprise were two directors with

whom he had enjoyed working on TV movies he had written: Philippe Triboit, who had directed *Le Train de 16h19* (France 2, 2003), and Patrick Dewolf, who worked as a director on *Nom de Code DP* (France 2, 2004). They were both very interested in recreating the time period of Occupation, and even more in the opportunity to tell a complex story about ordinary individuals trapped in compelling circumstances. Terego would own 20 per cent of the rights to *UVF*. The partner companies agreed on the fact that “in case of an artistic dispute, Terego would win over Tétra Média, but in case of a financial dispute, Tétra Média would prevail” (Boyer 2016, Krivine 2016). Ten years later, all parties involved agree that it was a very healthy *modus operandi* which allowed these strong personalities to work together (Boyer 2016, Daucé 2016, Krivine 2016, Triboit 2016). Yet Dewolf soon left Terego over artistic differences.

Un Village français became the only French series to be run by a triumvirate, a sort of *three-headed showrunner*. Daucé explains:

Frédéric [Krivine] is mostly the headwriter, and Philippe [Triboit] is foremost a director. Both have ideas on what the other does but they deeply respect each other's work. My role is to make it happen, on a financial and human level, as well as to negotiate with the broadcaster (Daucé 2016).

This last part proved to be fundamental, because after France 3 had approved the concept, they were less than happy with the directions in which Krivine chose to take the script (Krivine 2016).

At first, *UVF* had the dedicated support of Patrick Péchoux, the head of the Fiction Department at France 3 who had pushed for innovative programs like *Plus Belle la Vie*, and bold TV movies on sensitive subjects, such as the worker's rebellion at the chemical factory Cellatex in 2000, the unsolved murder of the young Grégory Villemin in 1984, children's penal colonies in the 19th century, or even slavery (Constant 2007). But a long illness in 2006 resulted in Péchoux's untimely death at the age of 41, which tragically prevented him from seeing this new project through (Boyer 2016, Krivine 2016). At the time, the CEO of France Télévisions, Patrick de Carolis, and his closest advisor Patrice Duhamel, believed in patrimonial fictions, with clear good vs. evil narratives, pretty costumes and lavish settings, such as the anthology *Chez Maupassant* (France 2, 2007-2011). France 3's executives also assumed their audience would only tune-in for positive characters and model citizens. This editorial

line, established by Claude de Givray, the Head of Fiction Department at TF1 from 1985 to 1999 and followed by every other broadcaster, was still the unchallenged guiding rule ten years later (Zemniak 2017: 33-34).

The France 3 executives had little experience developing ensemble series, let alone a drama with the potential to run for several seasons. They did not understand a mode of storytelling in which the eventual fate of the main protagonists was uncertain, and how an audience could be engaged in a television drama featuring characters who did the right thing for the wrong reasons, or the wrong thing for the right ones. Moreover, they were convinced that viewers would not understand such morally ambiguous behaviour (Krivine 2016). From the start, Frédéric Krivine probably appeared to them as a cold intellectual, his strong political opinions thought to be out of touch with their aging audience, who were imagined as uncomfortable with morally and politically challenging material. The executives wanted more romance, more likable heroes, and more drama, while at the same time looking for historical accuracy, or at least their idea of it (Krivine 2016). This reflects Dominique Pasquier and Sabine Chalvon-Demersay's observation of France 3 in the 1990s, that the complex and changing hierarchy inside the channel's fiction department often led to the writers and producers receiving mixed messages from executives (1995: 107-10).

On the other side of the table was Frédéric Krivine. Having read countless books on the war, and worked under the careful supervision of renowned historian Jean-Pierre Azéma⁹, the writer was convinced his vision of World War 2 history was correct, and that his work was being misunderstood. Believing he could not be heard, he stopped listening to criticisms and suggestions altogether. Krivine admits:

We were facing people who did not understand our project, and so we did not take their opinions into account, even if, in retrospect, some of them made a lot of sense, like developing familial relationships or ending episodes with cliffhangers. I had worked with TV execs before, so I did not cave, in order to defend my position as the *auteur* (Krivine 2016).

9 Professor at Sciences Po, Jean-Pierre Azéma is one of the most prominent French specialist of France during the German Occupation, with a vision miles away from a “Good vs. Evil” interpretation of the past. He gained academic recognition by highlighting the ambiguous behaviours and attitudes of ordinary and powerful citizens between 1940 and 1944.

The writer was in a stronger position thanks to his status as a co-producer and thanks to the complete support of Boyer and Daucé (Daucé 2016, Krivine 2016). The situation resulted in more than two years of stalemate.

The trio knew there were economic motivations for the networks' reluctance towards the project (they were being asked to invest 5 to 6 million euros in a project that could be readily overlooked by their viewers), but also political ones. Even if France Télévisions is officially independent from the government¹⁰, there are nevertheless close unofficial ties and numerous back doors linking the two institutions (Zemniak 2017: 36-7). As soon as the project had been admitted into the development phase, France 3 had started communicating with the government about its upcoming fiction about World War 2. Expectations were high. Vincent Meslet, the Head of Programming at the time, believed in the project, and his support was imperative. Despite the reservations of some, and the culture of risk-aversion in the French TV business, everybody at France 3 wanted to make *UVF* happen, but nobody wanted to be held responsible for its possible failure. Frédéric Krivine finally agreed to work with an additional writer, who had to be a woman so that France 3 could see that he was trying to add sensibility to his supposedly dry writing. They asked Christiane Lebrima, whom they knew and respected from her work on *Plus Belle la Vie*, to rewrite the dialogue. According to Krivine, she finally rewrote – in a minor way – about 40 out of the 600 lines of the pilot. Nevertheless, it was enough to show France 3 his goodwill. Yet the surreal part was that some TV executives still strongly criticized the writing of the pilot (Krivine 2016). They nevertheless gave the project a green light; shooting could finally begin. In March 2008, the channel finally decided to commission 6 episodes (not 12 as originally planned).

This long process is representative of the profound distrust that exists between French TV executives and writers (Pasquier and Chalvon-Demersay 1995: 108-10; Zemniak 2017: 152), and can help explain why so many French series change or add writers during the development phase. It also underlines why so many bold projects seem watered down when they arrive on air. *Un Village français* is an unusual series, first, because its head writer “did not cave” (Krivine 2016) to the broadcaster's rewriting suggestions, and secondly because he was a co-producer and benefited from the utter support

of his fellow co-producers, who took huge financial risks in agreeing to delay the production¹¹.

2.3. Drama vs. History: an auteur's singularity and historical accuracy

When he was a student at the Centre de Formation des Journalistes in Paris in the late 1970s through the early 1980s, Frédéric Krivine was deeply impressed by his history teacher Jean-Pierre Azéma, who had just published groundbreaking books about France during World War 2¹². That is why he asked his former teacher to become the show's historical advisor. It turned out the professor had also been impressed by the young man and still remembered the almost perfect mark he granted to one of his essays. Azéma agreed to act as the historical consultant on the show, providing that the story will reach 1945 and put some collaborators on trial, the characters would act ambiguously, and all historical aspects of the scripts would be discussed before shooting. Azéma suggested the series be set in the department of Jura, close to Switzerland, in a small city near the demarcation line cutting out the northern part of France occupied by the Germans from the so-called ‘free zone’ in the South. This setting would allow many historical issues and political stakes of the period to be addressed (Azéma 2017). Krivine named it Villeneuve, in France a generic name for a town, to prevent it from being confused with any actual town (Krivine 2014).

The writing process would involve Krivine and half a dozen of TV writers assembled in a workshop. But before it was launched, Krivine and his former professor sat down for hours over a few weeks to review the relevant historical events, and to discuss the political, economic, social, cultural and everyday issues that concerned ordinary French people at specific points during the war, making a list of the issues upon which they would build the storylines. Further discussions were required to make sure that the characters' knowledge, behaviours, and responses to the fictional events were appropriate to the precise historical moment being depicted. For example, as the characters would be ignorant of Auschwitz, they could utter anti-Semitic remarks from time to time without feeling ashamed. And, of course, some would choose the “wrong side of History”, by collaborating with the

10 In June 2008, President Nicolas Sarkozy decided that the Head of France Télévisions will be appointed by the President. Before that, he or she was elected by the members of the Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel, the public administration in charge of regulating TV and radio in France.

11 *Un Village français* was Tetra Media's first project accepted by a French TV channel since Jean-François Boyer had bought the firm.

12 Jean-Pierre Azéma, *La Collaboration, 1940-1944*, Paris, PUF, 1975 and Jean-Pierre Azéma, *De Munich à la Libération, 1938-1944*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1979.

Nazis for genuine and altruistic reasons, like Daniel Larcher (Robin Renucci), who agrees to become the town's mayor and to work with the Germans in order to ease the sufferings and hardships of his fellow citizens (Azéma 2017).

With a narrative spanning over five years, with no military battles nor historical figures, the series could show how people's opinions can change over time, how political sides can become clearer, or more confused, how someone can choose to collaborate in a given situation but will then help the Resistance in another. The ambition was to break with the judgemental discourse of numerous World War 2 narratives, such as the film and subsequent TV series *La Ligne de Démarcation*¹³, which depicted collaborators as villains and Resistance fighters as heroes. At the centre of the show was the ambition to evoke an empathetic response from the audience towards every character. Krivine often refers to what a collaborator said during his trial in 1946: "during a crisis, doing your duty is not the difficult part; it is knowing what your duty is" (Krivine 2014). The quote guided him throughout the writing of *UVF*.

Krivine and Azéma's common ambition was to bring some shades of grey to the public memory of World War 2 in France. As Krivine writes in a memo submitted to France 3 in 2006:

During the war, the vast majority of people were resisting the German occupation far less than it was later believed between 1945 and the 1960s (the 'resistantist myth'), but they were not necessarily all supporting Pétain like people started to believe in the 1970s after Marcel Ophuls' *Le Chagrin et la Pitié* or Robert Paxton's *Vichy France* (Savoir au Présent 2013).

At first, he wanted to create ordinary characters who did not have much to do with the historical events, those 95 per cent of the population who simply had to go on living their ordinary lives between 1940 and 1944, going to work, raising their children, falling in or out of love, and so on. He was influenced by 1970s TV series such as *La Maison des bois* (ORTF, 1971) and *Le 16 à Kerbriant* (ORTF, 1972), and the film *Le Voyage des comédiens* (Theo Angelopoulos, 1975). These were "war stories where you did not actually see the military

13 Based on a scenario written by real-life Resistance fighter Colonel Rémy, *La Ligne de Démarcation* was first a film directed by Claude Chabrol in 1966 with Jean Seberg, Maurice Ronet and Daniel Gélin, and was then adapted as a daily 13-minute episode serial on the ORTF in December 1973, with Christian Barbier, Victor Lanoux, the comedian Coluche, and with Rémy playing himself. Two characters of *Un Village français* are named Raymond and Marie like the main protagonists of the film.

aspects of the war, where the plot was first and foremost about complex human beings" (Krivine 2016).

Krivine's personal interest was to expose the nuances of the human condition, rather than re-enacting historical events. Triboit shared his view:

A good film has many layers of interpretation, so it can speak in different ways to different people. It has to be entertaining, for sure, but it should also trigger philosophical afterthought. For us, that is what a series on public television shall do. In the case of *Un Village français*, it can make you think about freedom and fate, oppression and political commitment, your place in History and more generally about the human soul (Triboit 2016).

Daucé also wishes to make quality TV: "*UVF* shows how people break bad, both morally and socially, when their world is shattered. On a public network, you have to convey a political and social stance you believe in, even if your primary focus is to tell a good story" (Daucé 2017).

Krivine had indeed to write a story that millions of viewers would want to immerse themselves in week after week, so he had to add *drama* to his balanced view of the historical reality. Hence the characters became less ordinary than originally planned: some things had to happen to them, they should stand at the core of moral dilemmas, and it often meant becoming politically involved with one side or another. That is why the main protagonists are public officials (Daniel Larcher, Servier), business owners (Raymond Schwartz, Albert Crémieux), police (de Kervern, Marchetti), teachers (Lucienne, Bériot), communist activists (Marcel Larcher, Suzanne), i.e. people who have an influence on their community. Krivine explains:

The characters of *UVF* are ultimately more politically engaged than most of real French citizens of that time. I am writing a drama that aims at riveting 15 per cent of the national audience in prime-time, not a History book. The viewers want to see Nazis, collaborators and resistant fighters in a World War 2 drama, not ordinary bourgeois who live like it is 1952. The characters might have been very different if I had been writing for Arte¹⁴ (Krivine 2017).

14 Arte is a German-French public channel with a niche audience averaging around 2 per cent of total viewers. Its budget for original TV fiction is ten times smaller than that of France Televisions, and its editorial guidelines aim towards innovative subjects, storylines and/or points of view.

Writing an engaging story and fulfilling viewers' expectations while developing a strong *auteur* point of view was at the core of *UVF* since Daucé started to imagine it: "as a producer, my mission is to accompany an *auteur*, someone with a singular *Weltanschauung* and able to express it through a well-structured story" (Daucé 2017).

Krivine's *Weltanschauung* is truly front and centre in *UVF*, at times at the cost of local historical accuracy. For example, Villeneuve is supposed to be a town of 5,000 inhabitants in the North-East of France, yet you barely see priests or people going to church, whereas you have plenty of communists in a region where Catholicism was very strong in the 1930s and communism a minor political movement deeply affected by its ban after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (the German-Soviet Non-aggression Pact) of 1939.

My personal obsession always wins against historical accuracy, because I am the one telling the story. I am not that interested in religion and Catholics, so these issues play a minor role in *UVF*. On the contrary, Stalinism is the bee in my bonnet¹⁵, so one of the main characters had to be communist. In a broader sense, I've been deeply struck by the fact that both my grandfathers led double lives during the war. They both had a mistress, and one of them assumed the identity of his brother after he had been deported by the Germans. (Krivine 2016)

Even if Krivine works with other writers to develop plots and sub-plots in each season, he always has the final say about every line of dialogue.

I see myself as a bottleneck in our writing process. I am the reason why we cannot write episodes like the Americans do: I have to write every line myself, because nobody knows how to do it like I would, and also because the writers I work with prefer to develop their own projects rather than merely continuing mine¹⁶ (Krivine 2014).

15 Frédéric Krivine is the nephew of Alain Krivine, twice presidential candidate and founder of the LCR (*revolutionary communist league*) after he was expelled from the PCF in 1966 for having criticized the Stalinist interpretation of communism. His parents were both members of the PCF and leftist activists during his childhood. Several members of his family were arrested and deported during the war because they were Jews.

16 When Frédéric Krivine became a father of twins in 2013, he hoped Fanny Herrero, a talented writer who had been working with him in the workshop for

The work ethos of writers for French television is very different from that of their counterparts in the United States, for example. References and models are more often borrowed from literature and less from theatre, and style is valued more than dramatic efficiency (Zemniak 2017: 112). Even though the plot developments are decided in a writers' room, *UVF* is first and foremost, an *auteur series*, developing a singular point of view. Thus it doesn't pretend to be an utterly accurate reconstitution of everyday life in France during World War 2. What has made the series work and attract 3.5 million viewers on average, is that this *auteur's* interests and concerns were used to develop an especially fitting, resonant subject. Since the 1970s, World War 2 narratives, especially ones about the German occupation of France, are built around the idea of double lives, lies, mistaken identity and secrecy, from *Lacombe Lucien* (Louis Malle, 1974) and *Monsieur Klein* (Joseph Losey, 1976) to *Un héros très discret* (Jacques Audiard, 1996). *UVF* taps into that aspect, and makes the very personal meet the collective. It is also because Krivine's vision is understood by his two co-producers, Daucé and Triboit, that this *three-headed showrunner* goes in the same artistic direction. The trio reads and discusses all the scenarios before shooting, and Krivine makes adjustments accordingly.

3. A THREE-HEADED SHOWRUNNER, OR THE MAKING OF AN AUTEURS SERIES

Krivine undoubtedly plays a key role by giving *UVF* its peculiar tone. The overall quality and success of *UVF*, however, cannot be understood apart from the choices of director Philippe Triboit and the methods of producer Emmanuel Daucé. Triboit is a professional who has "no fantasy of making a feature film. He is an experienced TV director¹⁷ and knows how to express quickly and clearly an artistic vision of a given scenario", says Daucé (2017). As Triboit himself says, speaking at length of his directorial approach:

For *UVF*, I did not want the viewers to see my *mise en scène*, to awe in front of a beautiful shot or a daring camera movement. I did not want to do

years, could partly replace him, but she preferred to develop a new series of her own: *Dix Pour Cent* (France 2, 2015-). So the writing of season 6 and 7 took a little longer than for previous seasons, while France 3 decided to broadcast half a season per year, knowing they would be the last.

17 Before *UVF*, Triboit had directed many TV movies, but also ambitious TV series for Canal + such as *Engrenages* from 2005 to 2008 and *La Commune* in 2007.

something 'pretty'. I wanted to be as close as possible to those ordinary characters, so the viewers could almost feel their flesh and bones. The light had to be very natural, the hairdos loose, the costumes and settings should not be shiny or neat. All the furniture should not be from the late 1930s. The characters should live with disparate and worn-out pieces of furniture, wear out-fashioned clothes, like most people still do today. I wanted costumes to reveal both a social class and a state of mind, a personality. The goal was to immerse the viewers in a *period*, not in an antique shop. I wanted dust, rugged material, in order to highlight the period's hardship. I wanted the viewers to feel close to the characters, to feel what they felt and not to be in a position to judge them. That is why the camera is always subjective, showing the point of view of one of the main protagonists on the situation he or she is caught in. My wish was that the series would trigger questions and conversations among families, in the comfortable setting of home. I did not want *UVF* to be just a pretty or entertaining thing you absent-mindedly looked at. (Triboit 2016)

Triboit directed the first 6 episodes of *UVF*, then the first halves of seasons 3 and 4. "He is the one who has given its artistic direction to the series", declares set manager Laurent Cavalier. "The other directors¹⁸ could only twist [a] few things, but not change the main choices in terms of light, setting, costumes and acting direction. The technical team remained more or less the same anyway, as season[s] went by" (Cavalier 2016).

Every actor I have interviewed has also praised Triboit's direction, his ability to create a true stage-like atmosphere on set, with actors and technicians working together and taking the time to explore each scene, despite the fast pace of television production. Triboit has a gift for working with actors and helping them develop their characters. He spends time with them, reading and interpreting the scenario so they are ready on the set when the two cameras start rolling. Due to the multi-camera approach to filming, Triboit also knows he will have a range of options in the editing room.

18 Olivier Guignard (season 2), Jean Marc Brondolo (second half of season 3 and first half of season 5), Philippe Martineau (second halves of season 4 and 6), Jean-Philippe Amar (second half of season 5 and first half of season 6 and all of season 7). Amar was much involved in the making of season 6 and 7, and participated in the writing workshop of the 7th and last season of *UVF*.

"Sometimes it is only once I'm in the editing room that I realize what we have done and what the actors have given on a take. There's something magical. A TV director is less in control than a movie director, and I like it." (Triboit 2016)

A single director supervises the preparation (1–3 months), the shooting (55–60 days, i.e. 3 months including breaks) and the editing (3 months), so that each season's 6 episodes are made across a 9-month period. It would not be cost-effective nor reasonable to give a director more episodes to supervise. The decision to employ a single director for each season, and to commence production only once each script is written, produces a significant "bottleneck" in the overall production workflow¹⁹. To rein in the expenses, and to cope with several filming locations in distant regions of Ile-de-France²⁰ and Limousin²¹, Daucé chose to *cross-board*, i.e. to shoot every scene in one given location disregarding narrative continuity. It implies that all the scenarios have to be written and approved before the shooting begins. It also gives more freedom to the actors who only have to clear their schedule for a few days and not for months. Thus no role had to be recast over nine years of production.

The budget of *UVF* is 950,000 euros per episode, which is slightly above average (880,000 euros) for a contemporary French series, but rather low for a period piece, where sets and costumes cost much more. Television series tend to have daily on-set costs that are similar to those of a feature film, but operate significantly lower budgets overall. This reflects the fact that, on average, television series are filmed roughly three times faster than feature films. In television drama, each day of shooting will result in 5 "useable minutes", whereas each day of feature film production will yield approximately 1.5–2 minutes. "So we have to use two cameras instead of one, and the director has to explain clearly and quickly what he expects from the actors" (Cavalier 2016). Of course, it helps to shoot 6 episodes in a row, and cross-boarding cre-

19 A more recent French TV series, *Le Bureau des Légendes* (Canal+, 2015–), changes its director every two episodes, the writing of subsequent episodes continues while the first episodes are shot, and the editing also starts as soon as two episodes have been filmed. That way, Canal+ could broadcast 10 episodes per year. This process gives less power to the director and requires the presence of a showrunner (Eric Rochant) who is in this case more of a supervisor than an *auteur* in the French cinematographic tradition.

20 The main studios are set in a partly shut down psychiatric hospital in Neuilly-sur-Marne (Seine-Saint-Denis) and other recurring locations are set in Crécy-la-Chapelle and Lésigny (Seine-et-Marne).

21 The region is a financial partner of the series.

ates intense days but greater concentration²². Cavalier and Daucé thought that an atmosphere of conviviality was a very important factor on set, and that is why they hired one of the very best chefs of the movie industry, Patrick “Figu” Figueras, who has cooked for Claude Chabrol and Steven Spielberg. The lunch and sometimes dinner breaks had to be something cast and crew members would look forward to and when they could feel at home between shooting periods.

“Working with a French cast and crew, food is something you cannot be cheap about. It is an expense that is really worth in terms of quality and atmosphere. The key part of my job is not to spend as little – nor as much – as possible, but to spend wisely on what will improve the quality of everybody’s work.” (Daucé 2017)

Indeed, in France, a TV producer’s profit margin is not necessarily increased if their series is a hit – their benefit is simply another season order from the channel. The producers must pay themselves from the positive difference between their production costs and the investment from the channel and its commercial sponsors, often around a 10 per cent margin. A French channel usually pays 80 per cent of the budget, and the CNC gives 15 per cent. The last 5 come from other public and private sponsors. But what makes *UVF* much more profitable for its producers than most French TV series started with a set-back: France Televisions refused to distribute the series on other media (such as DVD) and in other national markets after it was aired on France 3, so the series is published on DVD by EuropaCorp and is sold abroad by Tétr Média itself. Since *UVF* is or has been aired in more than 30 countries, from the United States to South Korea, the co-producers’ profits are unusually high, and they can subsequently afford to reduce their profit margin during the production phase itself (Boyer 2016).

Daucé’s motto is “spend your money right”, meaning that every expense has to improve the quality of the series. That is why Boyer and Daucé chose to buy (instead of rent) most of the accessories, from cars to furniture: since they are antique, they will not lose value – and possibly gain some – once the series is over. Tétr Média also rents permanently the main set of the school in Neuilly-sur-Marne, which allows them not to dismantle it between seasons, which saves time and money. To improve authenticity, and

since Triboit was very careful that only natural textiles and historically accurate techniques were involved, costume design represents about 10 per cent of a season’s budget. Yet after shooting, some are sold or rented to professionals, and many pieces have been exhibited in museums for their pedagogical value. The cast is composed of experienced TV or stage actors from France and Belgium, and very often, secondary roles became recurring. After the first season, Krivine wrote specifically for the actors and what he felt they could be best at (Krivine 2014 and 2017).

From the start, Daucé, Krivine and Triboit discuss every scene from an artistic and financial perspective. For example, in the pilot, Krivine wanted to have several German tanks rolling through Villeneuve (a scene that is now used in the opening credits). Daucé said: “it costs 200.000 euros [i.e. eight times the average cost of one day of shooting]. Are you sure we need it?” (Krivine 2014). Because he wanted his tanks, the writer imagined that episode 2 will take place in a single location (an abandoned church) and thus will be faster and cheaper to shoot. According to Boyer, this type of negotiation and cost-balancing is only possible because Krivine and Triboit are co-producers, so it is also *their* money they are spending (Boyer 2016).

During the post-production phase, the discussions between the three co-producers are intense “Our main goal is to efficiently hook the viewers with cliffhangers, teasers, music, rhythm, etc.” (Daucé 2016). The three men decide the precise story they want to tell in the editing room: the order of the sequences can differ from what was written in the scenario, because each episode must have a specific pace, preventing the viewer from switching to other channels. “The audience must be under the impression that something is always happening, with a very clear knowledge of the character they are following” (Krivine 2016). Triboit elaborates:

The editing process is the moment where we choose from which angle the scene will be told. For example, if I have shot a scene between Daniel and his wife Hortense, inside an episode where both have major storylines – Daniel struggles with resistant fighters while Hortense has an affair. If I put the scene right after a sequence with Daniel, I will stress his point of view in the next by giving him more close-ups. If I put it right after a scene between Hortense and her lover, I will stress her reactions by choosing the close-ups I shot of her. (Triboit 2016)

22 The filming of 6 episodes lasts 55 to 60 days.

Some sequences can be shortened or disappear altogether, some can become more significant, a few can move from one episode to another. The choices are not always unanimous or even obvious, but each co-producer listens to the arguments of the other. “That is really when *my* story becomes *ours*” (Krivine 2016).

The agreed-upon version is presented to France 3 executives, who sometimes ask for a few changes here and there. “They had a great deal to say about the first 6 episodes, but since we are successful [i.e., after the first season], they intervene less and less. Popular success gave us an almost complete artistic freedom” (Krivine 2017). After the broadcast of the first season, the trio realized that France 3 was right to ask for more cliffhangers; their original idea to tell the story of the German Occupation one month per episode had produced a quite traditional TV series and an impression of a slow dramatic pace, even if the characters were greyer than usual and tensions mounted during 1.05 and 1.06. In season 2, Krivine set his story over two months instead of six, and season 3 spans a single couple of weeks. If dramatic amplification seems to have surpassed the initial pedagogical and academic ambition, in reality this tightening of the chronology heightens the viewers’ emotional involvement and their understanding of what is at stake, both personally and politically, for each character. It is also a way to assert the *auteurs*’ point of view.

CONCLUSION

The history of *UVF*’s production shows how interactions between all the parties involved (writer, producer, director, broadcaster) play a significant part in the creative process. At the end of his analysis of the French TV industry, Pierre Zemniak points to “a work culture of criticism and power plays” rather than enthusiasm and cooperation as one of the main factors which prevents France from being as successful as the United Kingdom or Denmark when it comes to internationally acclaimed series (2017: 184-5). The case of *Un village français* shows that enthusiasm and cooperation can exist and lead to success and creative freedom. With an average of 3.5 million viewers over nine years of broadcasting, *UVF* has become one of France 3’s biggest hit in prime-time, with a slightly younger audience than the regular 60+ viewers of the channel, critical acclaims and awards, and the highest engagement rate of a Facebook page about a TV series in French (20 per cent). It was also sold in more than 30 countries, including the United States.

The fact that its executive co-producers were a trio with distinct skills relatively equalised the ratio of power, while giving them greater strength in the complex negotiations with the broadcaster during the development phase. Moreover, the mutual respect and admiration for each other’s work, and their agreement on a common goal, prevented a clash of strong personalities and a battle between egos. Their relationship was strong enough to last more than a decade and they were even able to include a fourth partner for the last two seasons. After season 4, Philippe Triboit wished to create other universes, starting with a TV movie about World War 1 soldiers who had been shot as examples by their own superiors (*Les Fusillés*, France 3, 2015). He remained co-producer of *UVF* but was less involved in its day-to-day creation. Since Emmanuel Daucé and Frédéric Krivine had been impressed by the work of Jean-Philippe Amar when he directed the second half of season 5, they decided to further involve him in the creative process: Amar directed the first half of season 6 and all of season 7, participating in the writing workshop and bringing new ideas at a moment when the narrative was moving into the post-war period, dealing with the aftermath of the conflict and the political reconstruction of France.

This trio structure may be more suitable in a French context than the Danish duo (producer/writer) that was the cornerstone of the recent “Danish miracle” (Sérisier 2017: 46), or the American showrunner, since very few French TV writers have developed skills for managing the various requirements and demands of overall production. It might also sufficiently divide the responsibilities to allow each member to still feel like an *auteur*, with time and control over the creation. Yet so far, *UVF* remains the only long-lasting TV series in France to have employed three key creative personnel in this way. Other long-lasting French TV series have organized differently, but it seems that the vast majority now relies on some division of labour and shared creative responsibilities (see in particular Mille 2016).

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