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Television after 1990. The nation's chemistry

**Șerban Georgescu, film editor,
35 years old
Interview done by Gabriela Cristea**



When talking about television, everybody refers only to what is made manifest on the screen. They have no idea that a television also means the technical part: the cable boys, the people who do the filming, the montage and who have a very important role in creating the final product. I was part of these people. I used to do the montage and, in my first years in a television, I only had to do with the technical part. Practically, I can tell the subjective story of the man who helped others grow and become famous.

I really wanted to do this job. And when saying 'television', I really had a broad sense in my mind. Television means television. I didn't know the difference between montage and filming. It doesn't matter why you are there. What is really important is to be there. I had the chance... kind of accidentally, to be part of Channel 31, which, back then, was a district television around Ian-cului area. They had two hours of sports, while broadcasting CNN in the rest of the time. Back then, due to Sârbu¹'s vision, a bunch of people gathered around and happily worked for more or less three years. I am not very good with dates, but I think it was around '93, when we first started to broadcast. And, if I am not wrong,

I think that that was the first private TV channel. I cannot tell if SOTI was private. I have no idea! It was one of TVR²'s attempts to create its own 'private' TV channel... they used to do the filming there, in the television, with borrowed equipment.

That's what I know, that Sârbu and his Channel 31 were the first free-lancers. We were a bunch of people doing everything: from fixing the carpet till broadcasting live. Practically, everything. We did everything, up to broadcasting and filming and the great advantage that we had as compared to TVR was that the only journalist seedbed was there and they were already jaded. This is what happens to all of us sometimes in our job. Well, here, in our television, we had that amazing chemistry... because we were all kids, resembling that American movie... hence we only broadcast for several blocks around, and that was a television! We had the chance to learn things: from simply doing the montage you could turn into editor, because that man was simply needed and they had no money to hire somebody else. And if you managed to skilfully move the buttons, 'well, mate, tomorrow you are an editor or whatever else you want!'

I was 21, had been part of that television for

¹ Owner of a private TV channel.

² The Free Romanian Television, the national TV channel.

several years and the idea of competition was driving me crazy. Others appeared: Antena 1, Tele 7 and they used to broadcast movies! We didn't. A movie was a TV symbol. If you broadcast movies, you are successful. PRO TV was only broadcasting sports. These guys broadcast movies, so we are doomed. They beat us. There were several morning shows: 'Good morning, Bucharest!' I can't really remember, I forgot them. All the more as there was that carousel where you entered on one side, being something and got out on the other side, being something else. You were completely lost. I know that we had around 10-11 people in the editorial staff, together with a secretary. A certain Ciurăscu was editorial office secretary. Do you remember him? During the Shot Guy¹'s time, he used to be the presidential spokesperson. And he used to broadcast... I don't know where from: Tudor Ciurăscu. I cannot tell how he ended up there. From TVR... Maybe they had vacant places... The rest of us were people on the television car, broadcasting and doing the montage. We did everything, so that it was a sort of... 'You go!', 'No, because I did it last time...' all the time.

I remember that, like any other job with its own professional diseases, ours had them too: I used to take very little sleep and I would very often wake up in the middle of the night, thinking that I forgot to do I don't know what thing while being on air. My mother was very scared... look how her son ended up! I used to watch TV and fall asleep. If hearing commercials, I was up on my feet, looking for the central control desk to switch. Because you were supposed to broadcast I don't know what... Because of being so tired, you were just losing track.

Channel 31 lived till PRO TV appeared. It was a sort of PRO TV embryo. Meanwhile, while the old Channel 31 still existed, Antena 1 and Tele 7 ABC appeared and we were kind of left behind... They all entered the market very determined and some of our people started migrat-

ing to other televisions. It was a sort of special migration in both directions. The moment a TV channel was more or less on top, everybody was heading towards there. The only ones who were left behind at Channel 31 were the cullies, how shall we call them, the delicate persons. And Sârbu, in a very demagogical manner, promised that we were going to see what was to happen! He used to be a normal guy at the time. We used to be together every New Year's Eve, Christmastide or Eastertide. It was that kind thing of not having any obligation and we were happy to stick around! In the end, it proved a successful solution.

We represented a sort of hybrid of PRO TV. It was a very cheap and insignificant re-branding... immediately afterwards there had followed that huge boom when PRO TV aggressively entered the market.

For me, that was an incredible world. I was working with many people whom, up to that moment, I had only seen on screen. Wow! Afterwards, I had my share of big disappointment when realizing that between actor and real human being there was a huge difference. Being an actors is a role, a thing on the screen and that's it... I was really disappointed! Actually, this is one of the things that a television does: tricking you.

Then, a lot of Americans arrived, to teach us... There is a difference between having a scholarship abroad and learning in your own country. I think you learn better here. This is just a subjective opinion, but in our case, in television, those guys were pushing us forward and we were learning because we were interested in preserving our jobs. The televisions also sent people abroad and the scholarship they got didn't change anything of what they had to do when coming back. Here, at home, everybody was more motivated to show his best shot to the boss, to the American. Here, at home, you are somebody. Abroad, you are just one of the many with a scholarship.

¹ Hint towards Ceaușescu, who was shot in 1989.

It is a common practice for people to move from one television to another. I didn't do it. I pursued my job and, to brag a little, I ended up being very good at montage. And they kept me there, while at the same time taking very good care of me, because I was good at what I was doing and I had a good relationship with my colleagues. I used to do the montage for commercials, for movies. I didn't fall for the stereotype of doing the montage for news and thus getting jaded. I had this luck, to be very good at it and hence respected.

In 1996, the PSD¹ regime was overthrown. I remember that PRO TV had a campaign with 'You are voting for the change!'. And many people say that PSD or FSN was overthrown because of that campaign. And it really meant something... I was already part of the Promo department at the time and we found it very funny that we were playing with the nation's chemistry. We shall add a drop of it and wait and see what's going to come out of it! Things had already been decided way above us, and yet, I remember that at the time there were some of Cristoiu's editorials which stated it that it was the PRO TV team- he had no idea that it was the Promo department- which had an impact on the Romanian voting public. It was about that commercial with a fist, coming out of a sheet of paper and saying: 'You are voting for the change!'

The funny thing was that the guys who were good at montage and editing were hunted by the political parties, in order to help them with their campaigns. I was doing the FSN campaign during that time. We were more or less four guys, a kind of double agents. We didn't know each other very well. After doing the montage in televisions during the day, we used to film at the parties' residences during the night, hidden, protected. I was in charge of Ion Iliescu's campaign and I benefited from the strictest SPP² protection. It was funny, but when entering there,

dressed up like I also do it now: orange trousers or cut shorts, the agents were asking 'Who's the guy?' never mind, Iliescu used to say, he knows to do stuff... It was very funny!... And then, I used to watch the product on screen!

That thing with the double agent seemed very funny to us. Actually, it was the Balkan gypsy show. They knew where we were really working and what we were really doing. And I found it unbelievable that I knew what they were going to say in a week and they didn't care. For them, it didn't matter that afterwards I was going back to the television to do something else which wasn't in favour of their party. But they didn't care...

Anyway, when we started to know each other- because the television world is small-... it was practically a secret who we did the montage for. Now, there is no problem. We used to gather around and say: 'Are you crusading for...?', 'No, pal!', 'Yeah, mate, but you are the only one doing this type of montage...' As a matter of fact, I knew the way that or the other would do the montage... well, the best guys... And we used to start all this row over some beers: 'No, mate, are you crazy, how should I do the montage for I don't know what party!? I didn't do the montage for anyone...' Or even better, we also did this trick, having this lie at hand: 'Bloody bastards, they didn't take me to film their campaign!'

I think that politics influenced television very much. But I cannot say much about it because I am not a political analyst. If I watch TV, I am not influenced by what I see, but those at the countryside are. They were watching TVR. And they were voting accordingly.

There hadn't been any staff tensions between PRO TV and TVR. One of the best men in what regards the montage area, Costică Marciuc, had already seen one of my movies when meeting me. And he came to PRO TV, to some of his for-

1 The Social Democratic Party.

2 The Guard and Protection Service.

mer television colleagues. They used to gather around for food and drinks, stuff like that... I told you that migration within televisions was a fashion back then. And they were talking where it better suited them. So... And my boss took me with him for a beer. And that's when I met him. He asked me for how long I had been doing it. I said: three. He cursed me, hang you, I don't buy it! It was actually a compliment. He had twenty years of experience, of doing montage. That was my first medal. He was thrilled to see that a kid was such a quick learner. And this happened because right after the revolution, you had to do something. I was born more or less in the outskirts. I think that the school was there. The district school! If you did nothing, you were swamped. That's what happened here as well. When I entered the television, after two weeks, those guys were saying that I was as asshole as when I first arrived. After another ten days they all said that I pulled their leg before, that I had played the maiden part in order not to do that thing or the other. When that guy called me an asshole, I startled! I was afraid of not losing what I had always dreamt of.

Ever since I was a child, I have loved commenting the movies, the image. Without knowing anything of film or montage theory. I would have insisted more on this scene, that shot was I don't know how... that's what I used to say, driving my friends crazy. Or I would take movies and watch them all over again till learning them by heart. From text till the way a certain guy moved a camera... And I fell for it. I was a kid, but I met lots of cool people, elder than me, who accepted to let me into their world. That's how I learnt.

I left PRO TV. I wanted to see the world. Actually, this is how everything began. In 1997, they opened a television broadcast station in Sinaia, PRO TV Sinaia. I was working a lot. I think that in three years I worked as much as I would have worked in five. How many nights I stood up, even if already stressed... I lost my hair, I didn't know what to do. I told Sârbu, I want there, I want to go to Sinaia. I am taking

some kids, I am teaching them how to do the montage, how to film, I hang around a while... But, no, take care because you are going to singe your feathers!

And this is when I had a revelation. I realized that that was the age when one had to see the world and that I had enough, I was going to quit my job. I'll leave for a year, I'll see what it is there to see and, when coming back, I will still remember my job. Now is the right time. I won't do it at 40-50... And I went to buy myself equipment. I was dreaming of the Frozen North, I had always loved that. And, while buying the equipment, I had the second revelation... I shall follow these things, these lights crossing my mind. I say: why should I leave now and break my back working out there? Why shouldn't I start making documentaries on their money? And I went to Sârbu and I told him, I need you to let me go for two months because I can't take it anymore! And he did because I was like his child. He helped me and I went to Alaska, together with a Romanian expedition which wanted to conquer McKinley and stuff like that...

I used a poor camera and I did the filming under terrible conditions. I think that for what it had been, it came out pretty OK. They broadcast the movie on PRO TV and the people enjoyed it. They used to do Romanian expeditions around the '70s, but afterwards, in the '80s and '90s, nothing. This domain had been forgotten for fifteen years. Finally, a Romanian was filming other Romanians abroad... It was something different, not only news, wars and politics.

Oops, I saw that that was the trick! And I went next year as well, because those were the conditions. Afterwards, my trips started to bother many people. Hoy, this may be good, but he can afford too many things in this institution! And that's how I left PRO TV.

Then, Bose, as a managing director at Prima, called me and summoned me there. Of course that I went to improve their promo. Well, well... After four or five months, I left that place as well. Even if I did a good job, what I wanted to

do wasn't exactly what Prima had planned, being still an entertainment television. It was '98. I was 25 and I was making big money. And I said to myself, guys, I am only taking your money! I was just guiding two men, showing them what and how to do and that was it, because they had the same shows and they had nothing else to advertise. And I just wandered around for three months, listening to music. I had no idea what to do... I was completely jaded.

And then I said to myself, hey mate, it's time to make some money for yourself! And I set up a company, which went on very well. It had its ups and downs. Afterwards, I turned myself into a mere televiewer. I used to suffer when seeing the bad quality of certain stuff and be excited by the good quality of other. Ah! I am not there! I didn't do this... And, obviously, with my company and in order to make money, I entered this publicity, advertisement area. I had a good time making commercials. For around three years. And then, I got bored again. I think that there are very many clever guys who are wasting their time on trying to make somebody buy something. And I came back to my old love: the documentary, and I came back to television, but this time as somebody selling his product.

I was really successful with 'The Everest!' I was both the cameraman and the director. In TVR I entered the week's 'best of' that day. A documentary doesn't attract a general wide public. But I know that those in Arbomedia, those who do the advertising and watch the rating, placed this film on the third place. For me, the movie had been a great thing. It is only now that it comes out on DVD. After two years of drawing. Juridical drawing. I swore myself I was never going to return to a television. But it is this thing of bovine sentimentalism: when I see a nasty stuff on TV, I get mad. Who could have done it? It doesn't matter the acronym of the television, but I would really be happy for somebody to change that stuff. I am personally offended by the bad quality of that image.

When I see something cool, I am envious. I

remember the joy I used to feel when coming home to see one a good promo, mine or of one of my colleagues', or a nice campaign... it was flattering. It's a mirage! I have just returned to Realitatea TV, because I really liked the idea of starting all over again with a nice team, of learning new stuff. I have already experienced nice things! But it won't last... because I don't want the documentary thing to slip off my fingers.

Now, I came back to television because I have missed it. I have had my own production company for several years, which moves on pretty well and I left television aside. All the more that I don't find time to do documentaries anymore, because last year I had to deal with taxes, rates and did nothing else. But now, Bose called me to come and change the promo for Realitatea TV and I landed here for a while. If the majority of the people leave television in order to have their brain washed, I came back for the same reason.

I have several of the first commercials which appeared on TV on tape. Because I was working for Channel 31, the first private TV channel. Only TVR and Channel 31 had equipment for advertising. In TVR, the guys used to do underground work, filming commercials. Yes, that was a beautiful world! In time, the agencies started looking for private entrepreneurs. That is, for us. This is how I ended up doing montage for commercials. I did the montage, the screen versions. I think I filmed and did the montage for 90% of all commercials on all TV channels. Hence the waking up when hearing a commercial. I thought I was at the mounting table and I forgot to put something in! Yes, I had a lot to do with the evolution of the commercial in Romania.

I used to be the witness of technical changes for a long time. But, this, again, is the part of television people speak very rarely about, even if it is so important. For example, even in cinematography, special effects, music and filming effects have changed the movie very much. I remember the way we worked and what mounting

table we used and the trouble we had to go through. How we managed to inscribe over a commercial: 'Colgate makes your teeth turn white', for example. We used to print the slogan on a paper, stick it on a wall, while filming with a camera. And if the guy printed something on a poor quality paper, I can't even imagine the result. You know, there were some unimaginable, unbelievable things going on back then. You had to make I don't know how many copies of that tape, till you got it right. If a guy from a foreign television had seen something and had come to ask you to do that stuff, you couldn't do it... The success of a certain group of people doing montage resided precisely in this. We used the microscope for nail and the other way round, we drained a machine of all its technical capacity, making it doing things which weren't even mentioned in the technical book... It was something crazy because you had to invent everything since we had no equipment.

I don't know if today one can do this any longer. I came back to television two or three months ago. I know it sounds pathetic, but at the beginning of 1990, one could say that certain

families were created... It was that amount of time that one was wasting within a television. I must have spent around five New Year's Eves and Christmastides with my colleagues. We used to share and smell everything together. After 48 hours of incessantly doing the montage, certain bonds were created. I think this is very important for a team! It is like a sort of magic which keeps the group together, I don't know what it is, but it is effective...

The girl I am visiting right now to borrow a car from used to be my colleague. We cursed each other, threw each other out, yelled at each other: give me lights or I'll set the house on fire! This is a nice side of the problem. Only the building yard crews are like that, where people interact perfectly. Or maybe, how shall I know, the pioneer spirit of the '90s, like in the Wild West, kept us so close... we were all in the same boat. Inventing a world!

Translated by Raluca Vișniac

