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Television entertainment in socialist Eastern Europe: between cold war politics and global developments

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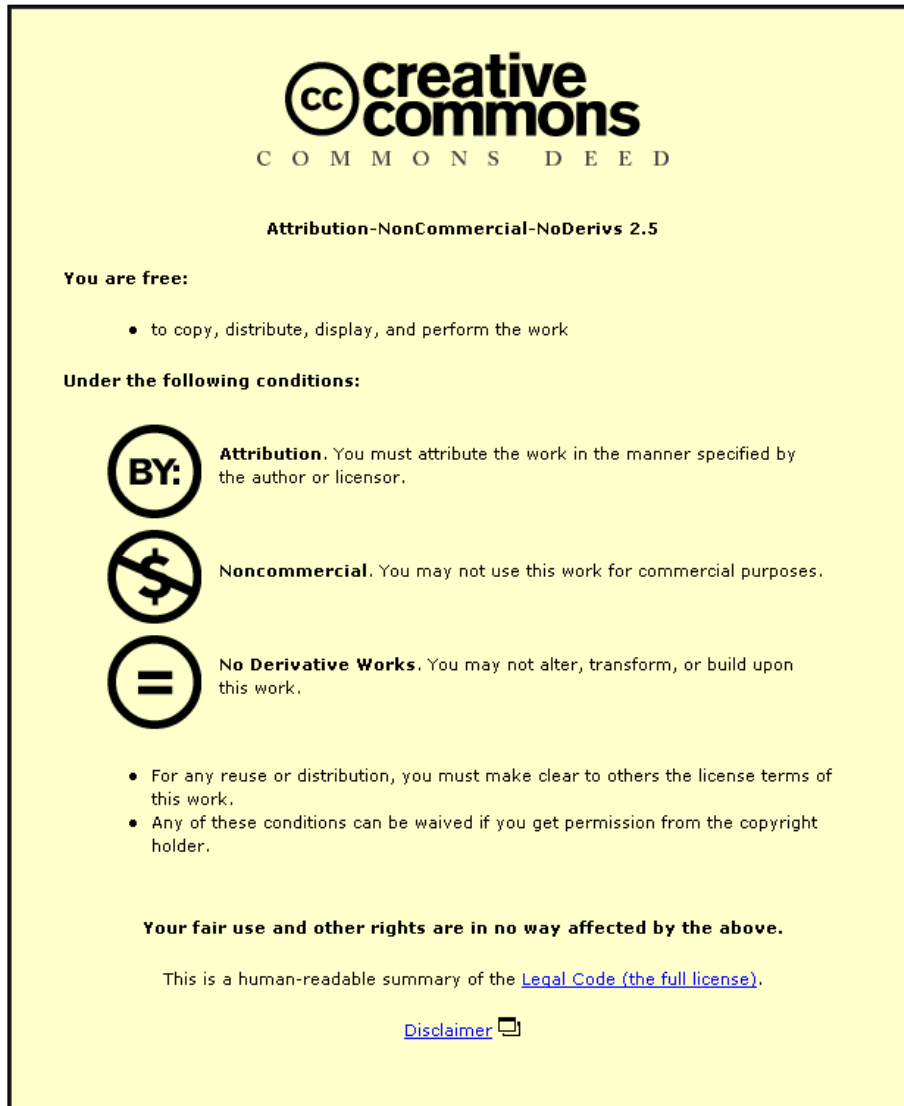
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TELEVISION ENTERTAINMENT IN SOCIALIST EASTERN EUROPE: BETWEEN COLD WAR POLITICS AND GLOBAL DEVELOPMENTS

Sabina Mihelj

Moments of abrupt transformation provide convenient frameworks for interpretation and understanding. They allow us to organize our thinking into neatly separated compartments of ‘before’ and ‘after,’ and invite us to identify and explain the patterns that distinguish one from the other. The sudden collapse of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe provided just such a framework. As the bipolar division of the world passed into history, scholars, journalists and casual observers were left grasping for clues that could help make sense of the momentous transformation. The Cold War vocabulary established in the West, often reminiscent of foreign policy slogans promoted by successive American administrations—such as the ‘global democratic revolution,’ used by Ronald Reagan in his State of the Union address in 1987—provided a vast pool of readymade formulas. The end of the Cold War, went the argument, spelled the demise of communist totalitarianism and cultural isolation, and signalled the triumph of liberal democracy, individual freedom and capitalist economy.

It soon became clear that such formulas provided little insight into the actual processes of transformation occurring in the region. Many of the countries seemed unable to progress beyond the ‘transitional’ phase, and were plagued by corruption and low levels of political participation and public confidence. Faced with this outcome, several analysts abandoned the initial transition paradigm, and instead acknowledged the existence of multiple transformations, historical legacies and continuities (Stark 1992; Carothers 2002). Debates about post-socialist media followed a similar pattern. Communication scholars approached

the changing media landscapes armed with concepts derived from democratization, civil society and public sphere theory, only to find that the reality fell short of established ideals and thresholds (Splichal 1994; Gross 2002; Jakubowicz 2007). Across the region, the news media remained highly politicized and partisan, unable to sustain an independent professional culture and strongly influenced by the ruling political elites. While the accelerated commercialization of the media sector triggered an explosion of new publications, these frequently failed to contribute to a more democratic and diverse public debate, and instead served as vehicles for private gain and personal promotion.

To account for these changes, some media analysts sought to develop alternative interpretive models—based, for instance, on the idea of elite continuity rather than transition (Sparks 2008). Others focused on building a more empirically accurate account of media democratization, one that would be capable of encompassing the diverse outcomes of change in the region (Jakubowicz 2007). Several authors also pointed out that the challenges encountered in post-socialist Eastern Europe are not unique to the region, nor reducible solely to the historical legacies of socialist politics and journalistic culture. The persistent partisanship and politicization of post-socialist media, for instance, is shared by several countries in Southern Europe—most notably Italy, but also Greece, Spain and Portugal—that have never experienced communism, and have long abandoned totalitarian rule (e.g. Splichal 1994). Such similarities with media systems beyond Eastern Europe, as well as the need to account for the diversity of media in the region itself, have prompted several researchers to adopt a comparative approach, and engage in empirical comparisons within and beyond the region (Dobek-Ostrowska et al. 2010; Downey and Mihelj forthcoming).

The body of work surveyed so far has little to say about developments in the realm of popular media and television entertainment. In line with the hierarchy of attention inherited from the Cold War, and guided by the most pressing demands of media reform after 1989,

research on post-socialist media has so far been largely concerned with media policies, news genres, journalistic cultures and media ownership. Nonetheless, this literature offers valuable lessons that are worth keeping in mind when examining the transformation of television entertainment. First, it is evident that a simple before-and-after framework will not take us far. While the landscape of popular television in the region changed dramatically over the past two decades, any account of this transformation needs to be mindful not only of discontinuities, but also of continuities with the socialist period. Second, media systems in the region were internally diverse. While some countries entered communism with a well-developed broadcasting infrastructure and entertainment industry, others had to build both virtually from scratch. Local appropriations of the socialist media model differed as well. And third, an adequate interpretation of popular television in Eastern Europe, both before and after 1989, needs to situate regional developments within the broader, international framework of television history.

Building on these points, the following pages set out to chart some of the characteristics of television entertainment in Eastern Europe before 1989. The first part addresses the issue of continuities and discontinuities, focusing on the role of Western imports and entertainment programming. While it is true that the collapse of communism brought significant shifts in both areas, important changes have taken place long before the end of the Cold War was even remotely in sight. To understand why this was the case, we need to set aside the notion of the Cold War as a bi-polar divide, and take into account structural similarities between television cultures on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Some of these structural similarities are outlined in the second part of the chapter. Particular attention is paid to the institutionalization of television as a mass medium with a public service mission, the rift between elite and popular tastes, dilemmas surrounding the relationship between entertainment and education and responses to foreign television programs. Viewed

from the perspective of these developments, the history of television entertainment in Eastern Europe was not shaped solely by the ups and downs of Cold War politics, but formed part of broader developments that straddled the East–West divide.

<A>Continuities and Discontinuities

There is little doubt that the availability of Western television programs in Eastern Europe increased after 1989. The fall of socialist regimes removed the remaining ideological obstacles that have made Western television politically suspicious. The curiosity about things Western, fuelled by decades of heavily restricted and politically loaded cultural exchanges, made local audiences and broadcasters alike particularly open to cultural imports from the West. At the same time, the proliferation of cable and satellite television originating from the West, and the rise of privately owned television channels domestically—often fuelled by foreign investment—were undermining long-established monopolies in the broadcasting sector. Faced with competition, public broadcasters looked for quick and cheap solutions to their new predicament, and Western television series seemed to provide a perfect fit. Across the region, audiences of public television channels were tuning in for weekly instalments of American soap operas and drama series, ranging from *Dallas* and *Dynasty* to *E.R.* and *Beverly Hills* (Štětka forthcoming).

Yet this is not to say that Western television entertainment was unknown in earlier periods, or that its prominence after 1989 can be explained solely by reference to the end of the Cold War. Of course, the situation varied considerably from country to country, as well as from period to period. Soviet television was far more impervious to Western imports—and in fact to any imports—than televisions elsewhere in the region. The first large-scale comparative study of international television flows, conducted in the early 1970s, revealed that Central Television 1—the main national television channel in the Soviet Union at the

time—imported a mere 5% of its program (Nordenstreng and Varis 1974, 24). In contrast, the proportion of foreign programs in the rest of Eastern Europe ranged from 17% in Poland to 45% in Bulgaria. A survey conducted a decade later arrived at a similar conclusion: in the Soviet Union, imported programs amounted to a total of 8%, while the figures elsewhere in the region varied from 24% in Czechoslovakia to 30% in the German Democratic Republic (Varis 1985, 34). Although a significant part of foreign programming came from the Soviet Union and from other Eastern European countries, the share of Western imports was far from negligible. In the early 1970s, 12% of all imported programming on Hungarian television came from the UK, 10% from France, and 10% from Western Germany. In the case of TV Belgrade in Yugoslavia, as much as 80% of all imported programs came from outside of the socialist bloc and 40% from the U.S. alone (Nordenstreng and Varis 1974, 25). In the early 1980s, an average of 43% of imported programming in Eastern Europe came from Western Europe, and only slightly more—45%—from the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries (Varis 1985, 35).

Precise figures for individual genres are difficult to collate, but available evidence indicates that much of the material imported from the West consisted of entertainment—principally cartoons and children variety programs, but also television films and series. In 1959, the small but rapidly growing television audience in Yugoslavia could follow the adventures of the female rough collie Lassie—ubiquitous on television screens around Western Europe at the time—as well as a handful of other commercially produced television programs from the U.S.¹ American programming remained a regular feature in the following years. In 1964, for instance, TV Ljubljana treated its young audience to a season of *Dennis*

¹ National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Record Group (RG) 306 U.S. Information Agency, 1900–2003 (USIA), Series P 142 Research Reports, 1960–1999, Box 4, R-26-61 “Foreign reaction to U.S. commercially produced television programs,” p. 16.

the Menace,² while female viewers across the country were purportedly swept off their feet by the charms of Dr. Kildare.³ A similar craze was sparked by the broadcasting of *Peyton Place* in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. In the Yugoslav Republic of Serbia, the series attracted an estimated 94% of all television viewers.⁴

While Yugoslavia's peculiar geopolitical position and relative independence from the Soviet bloc made its media system particularly open to Western programs, Yugoslav television was not alone in relying on imports from capitalist countries. Across much of Eastern Europe, the easing of censorship and the partial opening to the West following Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956 made East–West trade and cultural exchange much easier than they were in the immediate post-World War II years. Over the course of the late 1960s and the early 1970s, Romanian audiences could follow the adventures of the blue dolphin Flipper and his friends in southern Florida, marvel at the ingenuity of the American private investigator Joe Mannix, or tremble for the lives of agents Eliot Ness and Oscar Fraley fighting crime in 1930s Chicago—all characters in American television series distributed worldwide at the time (cf. Paulu 1974, 426). By the early 1970s, even Soviet television became more open to Western entertainment, and broadcast BBC's *Forsythe Saga* and *David Copperfield* (Lapin and Alexandrov 1976, 12). Bulgaria was, in this sense, something of an exception, and remained heavily dependent on Soviet imports throughout. Yet even here,

² *Delo RTV*, June 21–27, 1964, p. 1.

³ *Delo RTV*, May 3–9, 1964, p. 14.

⁴ Centar Radiotelevizije Srbije za istraživanje javnog mnjenja, programa i auditorijuma – Radio-television of Serbia Centre for Public Opinion, Program and Audience Research (RTS-CIPA), Report 493, Nevenka Perović, “Igrane emisije radija i televizije,” in *Rezultati istraživanja programa* 13, p. 12.

Western popular culture was occasionally allowed into the mainstream—as for instance in the case of the popular song contest Golden Orpheus, broadcast on TV, which featured performers from the West, including some from the U.S. (Taylor 2006, 125).

Polish openness to television imports from the West—explored in detail in Dorota Ostrowska’s chapter—seems particularly remarkable. A study conducted by a Polish sociologist between 1959 and 1962 revealed that local children frequently watched American and British action and adventure series such as *Zorro* and *The Adventures of Sir Lancelot*, and were also rather fond of Walt Disney’s cartoons and variety shows, in particular the *Mickey Mouse Club* and *Disneyland* (Komorowska 1964). Adult audiences in Poland also became accustomed to Western popular entertainment. In 1964, a Polish radio and television magazine listed six “most interesting serials appearing on Polish TV,” all of which were of American production.⁵ In 1968, a U.S. foreign diplomat working for the consulate in Poznan reported watching the American Western series *Bonanza* and the comic series *Bewitched*, the British musical film *The Beatles and Others* and the American film *Jumbo* starring Doris Day—all broadcast in a single day. In an ironic message sent to the U.S. Department of State, he suggested that Polish authorities were using such “bourgeois Western escapist television fare” to keep the population from attending traditional religious celebrations.⁶

Socialist fondness for Western popular culture may well have been occasionally facilitated by ideological motives of this kind, but ideology and politics alone cannot fully explain this unprecedented openness to Western imports. Another, perhaps more decisive

⁵ NARA, RG 306 USIA, Series P142 Research Reports, 1960–1999, Box 25, R-51-1965 “Overseas television developments in 1964.”

⁶ NARA, RG 59 General Records of the Department of State, 1763–2002 (DoS), Central Foreign Policy Files, 1966–1969, Box 409, Airgram from the American Consulate Poznan to Department of State, “TV Schedules and Religious Observances,” May 25, 1969.

reason, lied in the lack of domestic production. At the time, television was a novelty, experienced technical and creative staff was in short supply and funding was limited. Acquiring a television series or a children's program from abroad was, quite simply, the only feasible solution. By the 1970s, however, the situation had changed. Clumsy experimentation and sudden interruptions of transmission were giving way to more sophisticated, professionally executed and diverse programming, particularly in the area of entertainment (e.g. Vončina 2003, 137–300; Roth-Ey 2011, 273–276; Beutelschmidt and Wrage 2004). Technological advances paved the way for the decline of live television and the growth of recorded programs, as well as for the development of new genres, including made-for-TV films and series (Prokhorova 2003, 10–12).

At the same time, television sets were losing the status of luxury items and came to be treated as household necessities, and television signals were reaching a growing and increasingly diverse audience. Thanks to the constant stream of viewer letters and advances in audience research, it quickly became clear that viewers' preferences were often at odds with the cultural ideals espoused by television professionals and political elites. Rather than seeing television as an instrument of education and information, audiences across Eastern Europe—much as their counterparts elsewhere in the world—were using television primarily as a source of entertainment and relaxation. According to a survey conducted in 1963 in Serbia, programs combining music, humor and other forms of entertainment were achieving the highest viewing figures, and together with transmissions of football matches regularly rivaled the popularity of primetime news programs.⁷ The results obtained by audience

⁷ Arhiv Jugoslavije – Archives of Yugoslavia (AJ), Fond 142 Socijalistički savez radnog naroda Jugoslavije – Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Yugoslavia (SSRNJ), Box 207, “Dokumentacija uz teze o mestu, ulozi i zadacima štampe, radija i televizije o daljem razvoju društveno-ekonomskih odnosa,” Jugoslovenski institut za novinarstvo, 1965, p. 8.

researchers in Poland, Czechoslovakia and the GDR brought similar results: serious music consistently scored lowest, while films, quizzes and sports won top marks (Meyen and Nawratil 2004, 359; Paulu 1974, 306–307). The constant stream of letters addressed to Soviet Central Television was equally unambiguous: viewers were complaining about being bored, and demanded more entertainment (Evans 2011). Most worryingly, the desire for light entertainment—rather than solely information-seeking—was also fuelling audience interest in Western radio broadcasts (Bashkirova 2010) and, where available, Western television (Dittmar 2004; Bren 2010, 120–121).

Not everyone was, of course, equally willing to pay attention to audience preferences. Soviet television professionals, for instance, perceived themselves primarily as educators, and fashioned their work based on what they thought the audiences needed rather than on what they actually wanted (Roth-Ey 2011, 270–271). Yet at the same time, popular dissatisfaction with available television programs also signaled that something had to change. If television was to function as an effective tool of mass mobilization and education, and fulfill the socialist promise of bringing culture to the masses, it needed to be sufficiently attractive to all its viewers, not only to the educated elites. The wave of popular unrest that swept through many of the urban centers of Eastern Europe in the late 1960s and the early 1970s provided a further incentive. Arguably, socialist elites had to find a way to reconnect with, or at least pacify, the masses, and popular entertainment offered a suitable tool. At the SED Party conference in 1971, a figure no less prominent than Erich Honecker described East German television as boring, and called on broadcasters to provide their audiences with more entertainment (Steinmetz and Viehoff 2004, 320). In post-invasion Czechoslovakia, television professionals were urged to invest more heavily in light entertainment in an effort to win the hearts and minds of the masses, and prevent them from turning their antennas to television signals from Austria and West Germany (Bren 2010, 121–122). In the Soviet

Union, the ability to spend a relaxing evening in front of the TV set came to be viewed as a right—as reflected in the statement “the Soviet person has the right to relax in front of the television after a day’s work,” attributed to none other than Leonid Brezhnev (Roth-Ey 2011, 201).

Whether prompted by audience demand, lack of popular legitimacy, competition from foreign media or political fiat, television professionals across Eastern Europe were becoming increasingly adept at entertaining their viewers. Television schedules now regularly included not only domestically produced quiz programs and variety shows with celebrity guests, comedy sketches and popular music bands, but also made-for-TV films and mini-series and even a Soviet bloc version of the Eurovision Song Contest (Raykoff and Tobin 2007, xvii–xviii). Domestically produced TV series were particularly popular with audiences, and regularly attracted record ratings. In terms of genre conventions, they differed little from their Western counterparts: they frequently depicted the dramas of everyday life in the socialist present, or followed the trials and tribulations of contemporary detectives, police officers, medical doctors and shop assistants. The use of humor was widespread as well. As Katja Kochanowski, Sascha Trültzsch and Reinhold Viehoff show in their chapter, the geopolitical context of East Germany was particularly conducive to the production of domestic television series. It is important to note, however, that similar trends dominated television entertainment elsewhere in the region too. In Czechoslovakia, record numbers of viewers were turning on their sets to watch a never-ending stream of Jaroslav Dietl’s serials, including *A Hospital on the Edge of Town* (1977–81), centered on the daily dramas of doctors, nurses and patients at a local hospital, and *The Woman at the Counter* (1977), focusing on the life of a middle-aged, hard-working shop assistant living in a suburb of Prague (Bren 2010). In Yugoslavia, audiences were glued to their screens following the intrigues of *Our Small Town* (1970–71), set in a picturesque Croatian town on the Adriatic coast (Vončina 2003, 241) and laughing at

the twists and turns of family life in the *Theater in the House* (1973–84).⁸ And the list goes on.

Several of the most popular mini-series managed not only to attract record audience ratings, but also to win praise from socialist authorities. The merger of popular entertainment and state control comes most clearly to the fore in programs that received direct backing from socialist authorities. The production of one of the most celebrated Soviet mini-series from this period, the spy thriller *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (1973), was supervised and generously sponsored by both the KGB and the Communist Party (Prokhorova 2003, 80–81). In Yugoslavia, TV Zagreb's mini-series *The Bonfires of Kapela* (1975) received support from the Yugoslav People's Army, and the screening of its first episode was set to coincide with the official celebration of the anniversary of socialist Yugoslavia.⁹ The production of one of the most popular television serials in 1970s Czechoslovakia, *The Thirty Adventures of Major Zeman* (1975) followed a similar template: it was produced in collaboration with the Czechoslovak Army and the Federal Ministry of Interior, and designed to honor the 30th anniversary of the Red Army liberation of Prague (Bren 2010,74).

Not all of the socialist television entertainment, however, was quite so regime-friendly. In Yugoslavia, comic series such as *Theater in the House* (1973–84) and *Hot Wind* (1980) poked fun at the seamy underbelly of Yugoslav affluence, including unemployment and reliance on mass labor migration to the West. Likewise, the Soviet variety show *The Pub of 13 Chairs* regularly included stand-up comedy stints parodying the shortcomings of Soviet society, for instance the scarcity of consumer goods and the mismatch between political visions and everyday life (Paulu 1974, 177). Sergei Lapin, head of Soviet radio and television

⁸ RTS-CIPA, Report 645, *Odnos gledalaca prema TV seriji 'Pozorište u kući'*, 1974, p. 1.

⁹ Arhiv Hrvatske Radiotelevizije – Archives of Croatian Radio-television (ACRT), “Kapelski kresovi,” *List Radiotelevizije Zagreb*, 35, December 10, 1975, p. 7.

at the time, found the show rather irritating, yet kept it on air nonetheless—allegedly thanks to Leonid Brezhnev’s fondness for the program (Roth-Ey 2011, 279). Such forms of ridicule and criticism of course had their limits, and usually relied on doublespeak and irony, yet they serve as a reminder that socialist popular culture was not ideologically uniform, and that self-congratulatory, mythologized portrayals of socialist reality could coexist with more ambiguous messages.

<A>Similarities and Differences

To those familiar with trends in Western Europe and elsewhere around the globe, some of the traits of socialist television history outlined so far should have struck familiar chords. The 1950s and the 1960s have seen the intensification of international exchanges of television programs globally, not only in Eastern Europe (Havens 2006, 16–24). The growth of television audiences soon outpaced domestic production capabilities, and started generating considerable demand for imported programs. American products, especially entertainment and fiction, were in great demand.¹⁰ By 1964, major U.S. commercial broadcasters had an established presence abroad: CBS was operating in 170 countries and NBC in 80 (Paulu 1967, 215). In the same period, the British BBC also rose as an important player in the international television market (Schlesinger 1986, 275–276). The marked increase in imported entertainment on television screens in Eastern Europe thus formed part of global developments fostered not only by changes in Cold War politics, but also by transnational economic and cultural developments. The same is true of the growth of domestic entertainment and TV fiction in the 1970s. Again, trends noted in Eastern Europe have their counterparts elsewhere: in many countries across Western Europe, but also in Latin

¹⁰ NARA, RG 306 USIA, P142, Box 4, R-26-61 “Foreign reaction [...],” p. 2.

America, Japan and Egypt, the decade was characterized by an increase in domestic production capacities (Havens 2006, 24–26).

These similarities should not come as a surprise. In Eastern Europe, international television flows were of course more heavily regulated, the proportion of Western imports smaller, the production of entertainment subjected to tighter political scrutiny, and commercial incentives limited. Yet once we look beyond the realm of state control and funding, and consider the cultural and social aspects of television broadcasting, it quickly becomes apparent that television professionals on both sides of the Iron Curtain were facing many common challenges, and responded to them in remarkably similar ways. To start with, it is worth noting that the rise of television followed a similar schedule in both Eastern and Western Europe. The majority of countries introduced regular television broadcasting in the 1950s, experienced a period of rapid growth of television audiences, and reached the point of saturation in the 1970s. While the exact pace and rhythm of growth varied from country to country, it is impossible to draw a sharp contrast between Eastern and Western Europe: the spreading of television receivers in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary and the Soviet Union proceeded at a rate comparable to that in France, Italy, Norway and West Germany, while patterns in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria resemble those in Portugal or Ireland (Table 1.1).

[INSERT TABLE 1.1 HERE]

This expansion of television brought profound changes in the demographic structure of audiences, and turned television into a fully-fledged mass medium. In both Eastern and Western Europe, this shift was greeted with a mixture of apprehension and enthusiasm. On the one hand, it provoked fears of moral degradation, populism and cultural mediocrity. On the other hand, it inspired utopian projections of a better, more educated, refined and

politically engaged society. To early television enthusiasts everywhere, broadcasting technology represented a powerful instrument of mass education and cultural refinement. The BBC's founder Lord Reith was notorious for his belief in broadcasting as a means of cultural elevation, as well as for his disdain for popular entertainment and insistence on giving the public what they need rather than what they want (Crisell 1997, 29). Much of early television programming in post-war Italy was inspired by similar ideals. It was unmistakably didactic in tone, and consisted of live transmissions of theater plays, operas and classical music concerts (Monteleone 2006, 302–306). Soviet television professionals were evidently not the only ones who perceived themselves primarily as educators rather than as entertainers. In socialist Eastern Europe and in Soviet Union, didacticism and paternalist attitudes may have been more persistent, and more closely tied to specifically socialist and anti-capitalist attitudes, but at their core, the cultural values that underpinned the work of early television professionals everywhere were similar. Thanks to the institutionalization of broadcasting as a public service across most of Western Europe, such values continued to exert influence throughout the Cold War. As Brants and de Bens (2000, 16) put it, the ethos of public broadcasting in Western Europe was marked by a “cultural-pedagogic logic,” and was defined in opposition to private broadcasting. If the responsibility of private broadcasters lied in “providing programs people like” with the aim of, ultimately, attracting “audiences that they can sell to advertisers,” the task of public service broadcasting was to provide programs that are “in the public interest,” but “not necessarily what the public is interested in.” Socialist broadcasters would have found little to disagree with here.

The realities of broadcasting were often far from these ideals. As the reach of television signals expanded and television audiences grew bigger and more diverse, it quickly became apparent that attempts at mass cultural elevation were failing. Much as in Eastern Europe, broadcasters in the West were confronted with a yawning rift between popular and

elite tastes, and often reacted to popular pastimes with disdain and fear. Even in the U.S., where commercial broadcasting took root early on and light entertainment proliferated at a fast rate, concerns about its detrimental effects were rife. It was not uncommon for American diplomats and media analysts to look at broadcasting in Europe—including the socialist East—with a measure of admiration, and use the analysis of socialist television to convey their misgivings about television programs at home. A report sent to the U.S. department of State from the American embassy in Moscow described the contrast between two television cultures in a rather telling manner: “U.S. television is entertainment interrupted by commercials, while Soviet television is propaganda interrupted by entertainment” (quoted in Schwoch 2009, 112). The introduction of commercial television and growth of entertainment content in 1950s Britain provoked similar reactions, and helped sustain the value of public broadcasting as the guarantor of quality (cf. Crisell 1997, 108–114).

In spite of these shared misgivings, broadcasters on both sides of the Iron Curtain were becoming increasingly responsive to the diversity of tastes, and opened their waves to variety shows, popular music and comedy. There is no denying that television producers in countries like West Germany, France, Italy and above all Britain and the U.S. led the way and that on average, the growth of television entertainment Eastern Europe lagged behind and was often dependent on copying formats from the West. Apart from that, however, broadcasters both east and west of the Iron Curtain addressed the challenge of entertainment in an analogous manner. Whether it was due to the cultural mission of public service, or due to socialist notions of mass cultural elevation, they were expected to produce programs that were lively and amusing as well as educational and of high artistic and technical quality. In Britain, BBC’s *The Forsythe Saga* (1966) was celebrated for turning serious literature into a cultural product of unprecedented popularity, and for prompting a renewed interest in original literary texts (Crisell 1997, 116). In Yugoslavia, a report prepared in 1964 was underpinned

by similar ideals. In the realm of culture, television had the task of “providing cultural relaxation and entertainment to the greatest possible number of viewers, without at the same time neglecting the works of special artistic value.”¹¹ The guidelines for television entertainment formulated in 1967 in East Germany were no different in tone. They demanded producers to avoid both “trivialization” and “intellectualism,” and advised them to steer away from “aesthetic experiments in form” and “content deemed too intellectually demanding” in order to avoid offending the “the authority and dignity of audiences” (Breitenborn 2004, 392).

What made the dilemmas of television culture both East and West of the Iron Curtain particularly vexing was their link with national culture. Wherever it appeared, television became a national medium par excellence, and functioned as an instrument of national integration domestically as well as a vehicle for national promotion globally. In France, de Gaulle embraced television as means of spreading the knowledge of French culture and inculcating the norms of correct grammar and pronunciation (Smith 1998, 43). In Italy, television was credited with tearing down the barriers of regional dialects and bringing about the linguistic unification of the country (Monteleone 2006, 279). In the socialist East, the nation summoned by television may have been imagined as a nation of workers, but it was a nation nonetheless (Mihelj 2011, 78–80, 86–89). Debates about entertainment and education on television were therefore debates about what constitutes national culture and its distinctiveness, and about who has the authority to define that. Television professionals and policy-makers East and West of course conceived of national distinctiveness and diversity in importantly different ways, but the fundamental dilemmas they engaged with straddled the

¹¹ AJ, Fond 130 Savezno izvršno veće – Federal Executive Council (SIV), Box 566-942, “Stanje i problemi razvitka televizije u Jugoslaviji,” Beograd: Jugoslovenska radio-televizija, 1964, p. 26.

East–West divide, and stemmed from the growth of mass culture, technological advances and the reshuffling of traditionally cultural hierarchies globally. Is the nation best served by a television that provides access to educational materials and highest artistic achievements selected by cultural authorities, or by popular entertainment guided by mass preferences? How to ensure adequate diversity without diluting national distinctiveness, and how to cater for minority tastes without imposing unnecessary burdens on the majority?

In light of the combined burdens of cultural elitism and concerns over national integration, it is of little surprise that cultural anxieties surrounding television often coalesced around foreign imports—and around American television imports in particular. American popular entertainment was doubly suspicious: it embodied the specter of commercialization and the menace of cultural mediocrity, as well as represented an alien force threatening to undermine the authenticity of national culture. Needless to say, the very same reasons also fuelled popular fascination with things American, especially among younger audiences. This applies in equal measure to both sides of the Iron Curtain. Surveys conducted in Italy, France, Britain and West Germany in 1962 revealed that U.S. television programs, and American life more broadly, were associated with violence and crime, superficiality and lack of realism, as well as with vulgarity and immorality.¹² Results obtained in Japan were broadly similar—again, violence and lack of moral standards topped the list of negative impressions.¹³ In socialist Yugoslavia, the corrupting influences of popular music, films, dance and television were typically associated with capitalism and described as generically Western rather than American, but the main grievances were almost identical. According to a lengthy report

¹² NARA, RG 306 USIA, P142, Box 12, R-163-62 “The Impact of American Commercial Television in Western Europe,” 1962, pp. 7–8.

¹³ NARA, RG 306 USIA, P142, Box 11, R-152-62, “The Impact of American Commercial Television in Japan,” 1962.

discussed by the members of the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Croatia in 1958, the “petit-bourgeois popular press” has the function of “diverting the working man from the real life and real problems by imposing on him the problems of kings [...] film stars, millionaires, speculators, gangsters,” but also “by provoking him with sex, crime and cruelty.”¹⁴ In a similar vein, authorities in the closed city of Dniepropetrovsk in Soviet Ukraine blamed the growth of violence and ‘hooliganism’ among local youths in the late 1960s and the early 1970s on French and Japanese films (Zhuk 2010, 143–144). These transnational similarities remind us that reactions to American—or ‘Western’—television fare and popular culture were not simply a matter of Cold War tensions, but formed part of broader social and cultural developments that cannot be fitted into East–West dichotomies.

The same is true of the arrival of commercial broadcasting to Eastern Europe after 1989. Much as the reactions to American popular culture and the controversies surrounding entertainment on television, the deregulation of television markets was prompted by pan-European and in fact global developments, and should not be interpreted solely with reference to the fall of communism. Over the course of the 1970s and the 1980s, a host of technological, economic and political developments—including the 1970s economic recession, the rise of transnational corporations, the proliferation of satellite and cable technology and the economic liberalism of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan—helped bring down the established defences of public broadcasting monopoly globally (Dahlgren 2000). The change in ratios of public and private television in Western Europe speaks for itself. In 1980, television landscapes in the 17 countries of Western Europe comprised some 40 public channels and only five private ones; by 1999, the balance was reversed: while the

¹⁴ Hrvatski državni arhiv – Croatian State Archives (HDA), Fond 1228-Socialistički savez radnog naroda Hrvatske – Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Croatia (SSRNH), Box 933, “Pregled i analiza zabavne štampe,” 1958, p. 1.

number of public channels increased to 60, the number of private channels jumped to 70 (Brant and de Bens 2000, 10–11). In Eastern Europe, the explosion of commercial channels started a few years later, but many of its main motivations, as well as the ensuing tensions and concerns, were similar to those in the West.

<A>Concluding Notes

The overview provided in this chapter is inevitably partial and superficial, and omits several important facets of popular television history in socialist Eastern Europe, including the institutionalization of television as a home appliance, concerns over decency and standards, and the involvement of television entertainment in the changing leisure patterns and shifting relations of gender and generation. These and many other fascinating aspects of socialist television history still await their historian. What should be clear from the brief account provided here is that an adequate understanding of these developments cannot rely on the perception of the Cold War as a black-and-white confrontation between capitalism and communism, nor can it proceed solely from the established interpretive frameworks of post-socialist democratization and economic liberalization. Instead, we should acknowledge that many of the promises and challenges posed by television everywhere were similar, and that both popular and elite reactions to them often defied the logic of the East–West divide. After all, the history of television on both sides of the Iron Curtain, just as the roots of the rival projects of liberalism and communism, stemmed from the same economic, political and social realities: the growth of mass political participation, rising standards of living, urbanization and advances in transport and communication technologies. Due to that, the history of socialist television forms part and parcel of the longer and more encompassing processes of modernization that were pan-European and global in their reach.

A note of clarification is in order at this point. If this chapter focused primarily on similarities and continuities rather than on differences and discontinuities, it is not because the latter are less important. Nor was this choice of focus meant to suggest that we should discard the Cold War as a frame of reference altogether. Any comprehensive history of television in Europe, or indeed globally, has to pay adequate attention both to what was similar and to what was different, to things that changed and to those that stayed the same. Likewise, there is no doubt that television developments in the 20th century were to an important extent shaped by the Cold War confrontation, which made the policies and ideologies, as well as the day-to-day realities of television cultures in the East importantly different from those in the West. In short, by making a plea for a transnational approach, I do not want to suggest that we should simply collapse the history of popular television in Eastern Europe into a seamless narrative about the global advance of modernity. Rather, we should attempt to write a history that opens up the story of television to the alternative routes and visions of modernity beyond those familiar from Western Europe and Northern America, while keeping in mind their shared roots and common challenges.

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