

UTOPIAN (TELE)VISIONS

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Few people would have believed in the early 1990s of post-Wall euphoria that, only a decade later, Russia would reemerge as an authoritarian country with imperial aspirations, expanding its worldwide spy operations over the Internet to influence the political futures of other countries. Even fewer would have believed that semi-authoritarian regimes would also return and entrench their illiberal positions in the former Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe, or that countries that had been so eager to denounce their history of socialism and correct their path towards European democracy in 1989 would willingly realign themselves with Russia, barricade their populations behind walls and fences, and take a hostile stand towards the European Union.

Not coincidentally, we are witnessing the resurgence of interest in the histories of socialism and the Cold War in popular media culture. Television dramas such *The Americans* (FX, 2013–2018), *Counterpart* (Starz Network, 2017–), *Comrade Detective* (Amazon, 2017–), *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–) or *A Very Secret Service* (Arte, 2015), *Deutschland 83, 84 and 89* (AMC Networks and RTL, 2015–), *1984* (Netflix, 2018–), as well as recent blockbusters such as *Atomic Blonde* (2017) and *Red Sparrow* (2018), have resurrected the familiar narrative tropes of the spy series and transposed their relevance into our contemporary times of omnipresent surveillance and rising authoritarianism. Other popular TV shows reach back to dystopian novels about autocratic oppression written during the Cold War, such as the Amazon alternative-history drama *The Man in the High Castle* (2015–) based on Philip K. Dick's 1962 novel and the Hulu series *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–), adapted from Margaret Atwood's 1985 book of the same title. Such recent representations have infused the familiar nostalgic Cold War clichés with a decidedly contemporary sense of ambiguity, allegory, and dystopia. They probe themes of socialism and the Cold War for current, global political resonances of oppression, anxiety, and fear. These resonances include widespread digital state and corporate surveillance, Russia's performance on the international stage as a meddlesome power headed by a former KGB agent, and the appearance of "fake news" delivered by algorithms, along with the attendant loss of trust in institutions of state governance and the centralized authority of legacy news media.

Scholarship focused on the history of socialism and the Cold War has also flourished in the past ten to fifteen years. It has developed particular strength in historical and anthropological studies of everyday cultures of socialism, departing from the attention to political systems and the struggles between party-led dictatorship and dissident intellectuals.¹ In a similar vein, the study of socialist and post-socialist nostalgia has also generated a vibrant area of scholarship.² The renewed interest in the Cold War and the formerly discarded model of socialism is an indication of a search for alternative values at a time when it has become blatantly clear that propaganda, demagoguery, surveillance, primordial nationalism, corruption, and authoritarianism are not the exclusive properties of communism and that neoliberal capitalism does not inherently lead to democracy and social justice. While capitalism “won” the Cold War, it has failed to bring about an alternative; the widespread interest in socialism and post-socialist nostalgia is a symptom of a renewed search for an alternative vision. The vantage point of the stunning historical developments of recent decades now allows us to reconsider the legacy of socialism in ways that are unburdened by what was in 1990 an incontestable narrative of total victory versus total failure in a longstanding battle between two worlds systems.

Television has been one of the privileged sites where academic attention to everyday cultures of socialism and to popular nostalgia have converged. I want to examine some of the central features of socialist television in the Soviet Union and the former Eastern bloc that were relegated to the dustbin of history in 1990 along with communism. These features underscore the overarching communal sociality and educational ethos of socialism that television

1 See, e.g., Paulina Bren and Mary Neuburger, eds., *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 2012); David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, eds., *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc* (Evanston, 2010); Heather Gumbert, *Envisioning Socialism: Television and the Cold War in the German Democratic Republic* (Ann Arbor, 2014); Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics and Everyday Life after Socialism* (Princeton, 2000); Shana Penn and Jill Massino, eds., *Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist East and Central Europe* (New York, 2009).

2 See, e.g., Jan Assman and John Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 125-33; Dominic Boyer “Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany,” *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006): 361-81; Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, 2001); Anikó Imre, “Why Should We Study Socialist Commercials,” *VIEW — Journal of European Television* »

» *History and Culture* 2, no. 3 (2013): 65-76; Kateryna Khinkulova, “Hello, Lenin? Nostalgia on Post-Soviet Television in Russia and Ukraine,” *VIEW — Journal of European Television History and Culture* 1, no. 2 (2012): 94-104; Sabina Mihelj, “The Persistence of the Past: Memory, Generational Cohorts and the ‘Iron Curtain,’” *Contemporary European History* 23, no. 3 (2014): 447-68; Maya Nadkarni

and Olga Shevchenko, “The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Practices,” *Ab Imperio* 2 (2004): 487-519; Irena Reifová, “Rerunning and ‘Re-watching’ Socialist TV Drama Serials: Post-Socialist Czech Television Audiences between Commodification and Reclaiming the Past,” *Critical Studies in Television* 4, no. 2 (2009): 53-57; Irena Reifová, Kateřina Gillárová, Radim Hladík,

“The Way We Applauded: How Popular Culture Stimulates Collective Memory of the Socialist Past in Czechoslovakia: The Case Study of the Television Serial *Vyprávěj* and Its Viewers,” in *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism*, ed. Timothy Havens, Anikó Imre, and Katalin Lustyik, 199-221 (London, 2012); Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille, eds., *Post-Communist Nostalgia* (New York, 2010).

dispersed more successfully than most other institutions. At its most successful, this ethos manifested itself in socialist television's earnest utopian impulse to educate while entertaining in the relaxed environment of the home, as well as in its investment and success in contributing to the development of well-rounded individuals who were committed to cultivating their own faculties, and in encouraging a community-oriented sensibility. Admittedly, it is impossible to generalize across the different phases, forms, and geopolitical manifestations of television. But even during the system's waning years, when socialism's ideological principles had been increasingly eroded in a capitulation to market-based competition and individualism, in most countries within the Soviet orbit, television sustained this sensibility.

Television's Utopian Temporality: "Not Yet"

While the communist parties of the 1950s technically owned the new institution, its purpose and potential remained something of a mystery to them. Television's technological base as well as its programming was a mix-and-match of ideas imported and borrowed from Western European broadcasters, filtered through Soviet ideological directives. More centralized attempts at political control over television increased only in the 1970s.³ Communist parties then tried to mold the new medium to their own purposes: they developed centralized programming to standardize citizens' everyday, domestic life rhythms. As television was becoming a mass medium, authorities also attempted to instill in television the utopian ethos of socialism, which was propelled by the idea of ongoing revolution that would eventually lead to the radical egalitarian society of communism.⁴ Historian Kristin Roth-Ey evokes Russian theorist Vladimir Sappak who, in his 1962 book *Television and Us*, argued that television should capture everyday reality in the spirit of Dziga Vertov's *kinopravda*. It should be not so much an instrument for staging reality but, rather, a force of democratization and truth.⁵ In a way, television was romanticized and "futured," along with its imagined audience.

The goal of constant self-development oriented towards the communist utopia was served by offering a range of education-based programming that underscored hard work and self-improvement as inherently valuable to individuals who make up the socialist collective. Virtually every program was imbued with the overarching intention to educate. Tele-education was seen by party leadership as a key to the citizenry's erudition, from academic and ideological training

3 Sabina Mihelj, "The Politics of Privatization: Television Entertainment and the Yugoslav Sixties," in *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World*, ed. Anne Gorsuch and Diane Koenker, 251–67 (Bloomington, 2013).

4 Sabina Mihelj and Simon Huxtable, *From Media Systems to Media Cultures: Understanding Socialist Television* (Cambridge, 2018), 245–46.

5 Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire that Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca, 2011), 236.

through learning a variety of practical skills to the all-important but most contradictory goal of “taste cultivation,” rooted in the Kantian idea of aesthetic education. Heather Gumbert’s apt term to describe East German TV, “education dictatorship,” can be generalized across the socialist region.⁶

The operative term of television’s temporality was “not yet.” For instance, after the tenth annual Congress of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party in 1970, an article in the party newspaper stated: “The hardest task for the leaders of our television is to find the right balance between providing cultural service and guiding the audience. This is because this right balance has *not yet* emerged with reassuring certainty” (emphasis mine).⁷ In a similar vein, a prominent critic wrote in the journal *Rádió és TV Szemle* [Radio and TV Review] in 1971, “Society does *not yet* prescribe the mandatory behavioral models and achievement levels in the area of entertainment as it does in the areas of education and the acquisition of high culture.”⁸ The audience imagined by such assessments was always a bit disappointing: never quite sophisticated or enlightened enough, always falling short of the standards marked out by science, literature, and art.

Of course, these efforts did not automatically inject hope and motivation into viewers. In fact, by the 1970s, in much of the Eastern bloc, the failure of the utopian future to materialize produced a nostalgic structure of feeling for the lost possibility of revolution. Television recorded, reflected, and facilitated the shared experience of this complicated temporality. While it did not function well as a centralized schoolhouse, it helped make socialism manageable, redirecting its high ideals into the ethical principles of everyday habits of mind and body in a way that was much more effective and lasting than political speeches. Instead of becoming a vehicle for popularizing the idea of forward-marching progress, television became a site of permanent, self-reflective nostalgia for the revolution’s lost potential. Due to its domestic, intimate context of watching, the impossibility of centralized control over its reception and, indeed, the choice of viewers to ignore it altogether, the medium remained at odds with the goal of mass mobilization and ideological indoctrination. Instead, it foregrounded the stalled progress of socialism towards communism and became a platform for reflecting on socialism’s faults and failures, often ironically, at least in the most politically liberal countries. By the late socialism of the 1980s, television had turned into the primary medium of ironic overidentification with official socialist rhetoric.⁹

6 Heather Gumbert, *Envisioning Socialism: Television and the Cold War in the German Democratic Republic* (Ann Arbor, 2014), 2.

7 Miklós Jovánovics, “Pro and Contra Television,” *Népszabadság*, September 27, 1970.

8 Tamás Szecskő, “Szórakoztatás — Műsörpolitika” [Entertainment — Programming Policy], *Rádió és TV Szemle* 71, no. 3 (1971): 9.

9 See Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak, “Postsocialist Studies. Cultures of Parody and American Stioab,” *Anthropology News* (November 2008): 9-10.

This was exacerbated by the increasing leakage of information about capitalist lifestyles and consumer products despite even the most repressive states' efforts to keep it out. Television gave melancholic testimony to the permanently "transitional" state of socialism, and its increasing emulation and incorporation of capitalistic, market-based features and ideologies.

The 1970s and 1980s, nevertheless, managed to develop some program types and approaches that successfully and effectively molded education with emotional mobilization and participation. Recognizing the limits of straightforward propaganda and the specific affordances of a domestic mass medium, more and more educational programs began to solicit viewers' emotional engagement and participation, employing a playful or humorous tone, embedding their lessons in competitive game and quiz formats, mixing live footage with animation and studio conversations with dramatic reenactments, and employing well-liked, entertaining personalities as guides and moderators instead of academic experts. In the long run, these proved to be the most enduring types of programs, many of which survived socialism or have been revived by post-socialist nostalgia. I focus here on two recurring recipes for success in facilitating viewer engagement and participation: *emotional mobilization* and *competition*.

Moving TV

By the late 1960s and 1970s, the failure of Soviet-type socialism to compete on the international stage in the sphere of industrial production became evident. Following a political thaw, cultural policy in most socialist countries shifted emphasis instead to extolling the superiority of socialist lifestyles.

Leonid Brezhnev defined the concept of the "socialist way of life" at the Soviet Union's Twenty-Fifth Party Congress in 1976 as "an atmosphere of genuine collectivism and comradeship, solidarity, the friendship of all the nations and peoples of our country, which grows stronger from day to day, and moral health, which makes us strong and steadfast."¹⁰ As Christine Evans explains, the concept embodied a new direction in Soviet ideology towards identifying a moral, spiritual, and emotional existence unique to socialism and superior to capitalism. On television, this new form of emotional engagement was to break up the boredom and ineffectuality of formulaic news and documentary programs. It was to serve as a form of passionate

10 Christine Evans, "The 'Soviet Way of Life' as Way of Feeling: Emotion and Influence on Soviet Central Television in the Brezhnev Era," *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 56, nos. 2-3 (2015): 543-69.

counterpropaganda that would bring ordinary people and their stories of everyday heroism to the screen.

Evans analyzes the popular Soviet program *Ot vseï dushi* [From the Bottom of My Heart], launched in 1972 and hosted by legendary Soviet Central Television hostess Valentina Leont'eva, as the most evocative showcase of the Soviet socialist way of life: the program packaged propagandistic messages about the strength of the working class and the peasantry in a live, semi-religious traveling celebration, which was complete with sentimental music and imagery (close-ups, candles, and pastoral scenes). It foreshadowed the explosion of talk and reality shows on post-Soviet television, several of which continued to feature highly emotional stories of past sacrifice and suffering in order to foster nationalism.¹¹

While this mode of nationalistic sentimentality was fairly specific to Soviet culture, similar variety shows that invited the nation to participate in emotionally charged televisual moments also functioned as a regional format. For instance, the 1960s East German program *Mit dem Herzen dabei* [With Open Hearts], produced by the Entertainment Desk, was a live, traveling variety show intended to “celebrate socialism” and “honor ordinary East Germans for embodying ‘socialist’ values such as hard work, devotion to *Heimat* and teaching children the value of *Familientreue*” [loyalty to family].¹² Like *Ot vseï dushi*, the show solicited audience involvement, from nominating coworkers and neighbors to viewer feedback in the form of letters. Both programs also relied on hidden cameras to surprise their unsuspecting protagonists, often showering them with lavish prizes such as a new car or a vacation, anticipating the more manipulative and commercialized reveals of reality shows to come. Heather Gumbert calls *Mit dem Herzen dabei* a utopian “spectacle that ‘advertised’ socialism.”¹³

Paulina Bren also describes the post-1968 normalization period’s televisual turn in Czechoslovakia in terms of pursuing “a more qualitative socialist lifestyle.”¹⁴ Bren also identifies this turn as part of a European and even global shift in the 1970s and 1980s towards moving the exercise of politics into the sphere of private relations. Her main case studies for analyzing this shift are the dramatic serials that dominated Czechoslovak TV.

Drama serials or socialist soap operas also developed into a regionally shared, traveling format by the 1970s. They were created in an atmosphere of increased attention to women, consumerism, and

11 Ibid.

12 Heather Gumbert, *Envisioning Socialism: Television and the Cold War in the German Democratic Republic* (Ann Arbor, 2014), 149.

13 Ibid., 150.

14 Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring* (Ithaca, 2010), 207.

socialist authorities' recognition of the ideological power of emotional engagement. They took for granted viewers' familiarity with and yearning for imported drama serials and continued the earlier project of political education in less didactic, more entertaining ways.¹⁵ While most scripted dramas of the early socialist period revolved around men doing manly things in the public sphere, from war drama through adventure drama to historical mini-series, the post-1960s period variously called the "thaw," "consolidation," or "normalization" era turned the spotlight on the family as the microcosm of the socialist nation.

While socialist soaps were not overtly politicized, they all modeled ideal socialist lifestyles in ensemble dramas that encompassed the institutions of the socialist collective, most prominently the family and the workplace. Unlike historical dramas, which removed the narrative into the past and revolved around heroic male figures in the public arena, these domestic serials took place in the present and featured central female characters who acted as problem-solvers, linchpins between the public and private worlds.

Nowhere was socialist soap production as prolific and profitable as in Czechoslovakia. Dramatic serials date back to 1959 when *Rodina Blahova* [Family Blaha] began broadcasting live once a month. The most popular serials were created by the writer-director duo Jaroslav Dietl and Jaroslav Dudek during the thaw period and circulated within and beyond the region. By the 1970s, the genre settled into a one-hour format, with four 12-13-episode serials covering the entire year¹⁶

The soap opera genre has been called escapist or at least utopian, depicting a universe of privileged consumption.¹⁷ The Dietl serial with the most direct gendered address, *Žena za pultem* [Women Behind the Counter], from 1977, fully indulges in this utopianism. The protagonist, Anna Holubova, works in the delicatessen section of a grocery store, behind a stack of canned caviar; and her daily interactions take place among heaps of tropical fruits and an extravagant array of cheeses, an unrealistic spectacle in the austere shopping conditions of the 1970s. But the show stands out in the first place because it was designed to demonstrate the success of state feminism.¹⁸ The feminized workplace setting allowed the 12-episode program to focus on a female collective and thus model women's desirable roles in socialist society. Characters and narrative arcs were determined by an ideological framework: the morally superior, helpful characters were all party members while the anti-social, selfish characters were

15 As Paulina Bren points out, this was not an isolated strategy. Under Brazil's military rule, Globo teamed up with the government to showcase upscale lives in telenovelas as a sign of modernization and upward mobility. See *ibid.*, 125.

16 *Ibid.*, 126.

17 Christine Geraghty, "Soap Opera and Utopia," in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey, 246-54 (Harlow, 1993).

18 Jakub Machek, "'The Counter Lady' as a Female Prototype: Prime Time Popular Culture in 1970s and 1980s Czechoslovakia," *Media Research* 16, no. 1 (2010): 31-52, here 44.

not — although, unlike in the earlier period of strict socialist realism, these “bad” characters were gently mocked rather than punished for their consumer greed or bourgeois manners.¹⁹

Viewers were offered a range of female behaviors and were directed to identify with Anna, who begins her job as a shop assistant in the store after her divorce, embarking on a new life as a single mother of two. She is caught in a realistic struggle among her roles as a colleague, mother, and ex-wife. Anna, a socialist superwoman, demonstrates exemplary self-reliance and dignity in all three areas. Paulina Bren interprets her character as a mother figure symbolic of all women of the nation, who were called upon to heal the collective wounds of the 1968 trauma. To mark this convergence between the national and nuclear family, much of the serial was first broadcast over the 1977 Christmas season.²⁰ Actress Jiřina Švorcová was carefully selected for the role of Anna as she was known to be a diehard Stalinist.²¹

In most of the region, by the 1970s television was no longer seen simply as a school that summoned the masses to receive instruction from experts in a top-down fashion, but also, increasingly, as a public forum. The tellingly titled Hungarian program *Fórum* (1969) bypassed lectures and propaganda and invited artists, intellectuals, and politicians to a live town hall meeting held in varying locations. It put party leaders in front of the cameras and connected them with actual viewers, who asked questions about the economy and its reforms, political issues, and foreign relations. In this experimental format, “forum” meant an actual public forum, where party officials took a considerable risk: they realized they could not hide behind official releases any longer in the age of television; but once on TV, they were unprepared for the visibility it afforded and often exposed their own insincerity.

Similar to *Fórum*, the Yugoslav program *Current Debates* (TV Belgrade, 1965–1969) was a participatory discussion program that revolved around current issues based on audience suggestions, including unemployment, living standards, and political reforms. The East German *Prisma*, which ran from 1963 to 1991, was conceived to serve a similar purpose. As Heather Gumbert explains, it was one of the most tangible outcomes of the Agitation Commission’s appeal to television producers to create popular programming that would uncover and find solutions to the contradictions of socialism.²² The ultimate goal, of course, was to teach viewers to see themselves as part of a functioning socialist collective. Gerhard Scheumann, creator and first

19 Ibid.

20 Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV*, 164.

21 Ibid., 174.

22 Gumbert, *Envisioning Socialism*, 146.

host of the show, modeled *Prisma* after the West German current affairs magazine *Panorama*. Unlike *Panorama*, however, which focused on large-scale political issues, *Prisma* was positioned as a liaison between the party leadership and ordinary citizens, inviting viewers to contribute questions, comments, and complaints about a variety of issues that affected everyday lives.²³ Like *Fórum*, *Prisma* performed a delicate dance. On the one hand, it offered critical, participatory journalism that invited viewers to feel like they had a voice in shaping the system, and that the SED was on their side. On the other hand, *Prisma* embraced the license to criticize the party and allowed a range of previously unheard voices to be part of the national conversation. In one of the most memorable cases, *Prisma* successfully intervened on behalf of a young woman who was disqualified from attending teachers' training college because she refused to swim due to a water-related childhood trauma and subsequently failed gym class.²⁴

Participatory programs like these opened the door to audience involvement wider than ever before. Television had begun to take advantage of its unique ability to let people observe and vicariously participate in others' lives. Propelled by the socialist ethos of collectivity, such programs directed the attention to collective memory and systemic inequality rather than to a display of others' misfortunes.

This opening towards socially committed participatory TV was accompanied by television's experiments with mixing documentary and fictional genres as a way to reach viewers and loosen the definition of tele-education. From the clumsy, heavy-handed, and technologically burdened ambitions of mass tele-education through a variety of hybrid docu-fictional experiments, socialist TV reached its most effective educational formula in such hybrid, participatory programs. They underscore the fact that, in their most mature form, socialist educational TV was far from the ideological mouthpiece of the party. At their best, these programs supported self-improvement and life-long learning as goals that are always embedded in the collective interest rather than isolated as individual problems. They encouraged learning through participation and mobilized affective engagement without yielding to voyeurism or self-serving emotional display.

Competition TV

At the heart of socialism is a collaborative, collective orientation, routinely set in contrast to the competitive and individualistic forces that drive capitalism. It is therefore somewhat surprising, if not

²³ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 145-46.

contradictory, that competition was embedded into socialist lives and served as a permanent source of motivation for socialist citizens. In the broadest sense, all socialist institutions were implicated in the Cold War competition between the two superpowers. But beyond constant reminders of the arms race and the importance of diplomacy, even friendly encounters that showed no obvious traces of contest were underscored by a competitive spirit.

As economic, diplomatic, and military competition proved to be a losing battle for the Soviet Union, culture became the preferred battlefield. From as early as the 1930s, the Soviet Union pursued a policy of cultural dominance, declaring itself to be a true guardian of European classical heritage, as opposed to the corrupt and commercialized culture of the West. This rhetoric of cultural warfare intensified in the entire region during the Cold War.²⁵ In the Soviet Union of Khrushchev's thaw, television played a major role in shifting the emphasis to leisure and a particular way of life as the areas where socialism was to prevail over capitalism. It was the primary medium to coordinate Cold War competition in the form of various kinds of contests referred to as a cultural Olympics.²⁶ Soviet Central Television's musical and youth programming underwent a significant procedural transformation after 1968 to lead this charge. For instance, it began producing popular musical competition programs such as the *Song of the Year* contest.²⁷

Quiz, game, and variety shows were some of the most popular program types on socialist TV. The generic boundaries among these types tended to be muddled everywhere, but they all had competition and participation as their central attractions. Much as on Western European public service television, quiz shows were some of the earliest genres on socialist TV everywhere, introduced as part of live broadcasting in the late 1950s. If we trace their history, we see a transformation from the early, open-ended formats of the 1950s to more or less centralized attempts at instituting more rules and controls, which were intended to adjust the genre to serving the mass-educational policies of the 1960s and to marry socialist TV's educational mandate with an engaging format. The earliest formats arose in an era of fairly low regulation and high confusion among socialist parties as to the purposes, potentials, and dangers of the new medium. This uncertainty gave TV professionals some leeway to experiment with the genre, which was cheap to produce. As entertainment increasingly came to define television in the 1970s and

25 Pia Koivunen, "The World Youth Festival as an Arena of the 'Cultural Olympics' in Meanings of Competition in Soviet Culture in the 1940s and 1950s," in *Competition in Socialist Society*, ed. Katalin Miklóssy and Melanie Ilic, 125-41 (London, 2014).

26 Koivunen, "The World Youth Festival."

27 Evans, "Song of the Year and Soviet Mass Culture," 619-20.

1980s, quiz and game formats bore more and more of the pressure from capitalist competition and viewer demand. Direct, codified format borrowings began on a large scale in the 1990s:²⁸

Quiz and game shows resolved the contradiction between two ethical legacies: One was the value of hard work, which meshed together a pre-socialist, bourgeois, Protestant work ethic and early socialism's emphasis on competitive, numerically measurable production. The other legacy was the ethos of cultural nationalism, which embraced high art and revered the Romantic notion of creative talent. The joint effect of these two ethical mandates was the expectation that socialist citizens should continuously be in training to maintain a good intellectual and physical condition.

The purest form of continual training was of course sports. Every successful athlete from the Eastern bloc carried the double burden of proving at once the competitiveness of their nations and the viability of socialism. Broadcasts of international competitions such as European, world and Olympic championships were cult events. More broadly, the structure of sports competition was often directly projected onto quiz and game show formats, which helped minimize the genre's ideological disagreement with the spirit of socialist collectivity. In other words, the competitive structure of quiz and game shows was ideologically neutralized by the association with the alleged ethical purity of sports. Many of these programs actively cultivated this association, registering their work as an extension of sports, a form of cultural or intellectual Olympics.

For instance, Soviet television's most successful game show of all time, *Club of the Merry and Quick-Witted* (*Klub veselykh I nakhodchivlykh* or *KVN*, 1961-), was described by its co-creator Sergei Muratov as "intellectual soccer."²⁹ *KVN* continued the format developed by its predecessor, *Evening of Merry Questions* (*Vecher veselykh voprosov* or *VVV*, 1957). Both shows borrowed from similar programs produced in Czechoslovakia, the US, Poland, and the GDR.³⁰ *VVV* was modeled after the most popular 1950s Czechoslovak program at the time, *GGG*, or *Gadai, Gadai, Gadalschchik* ("Guess, Guess, You Guessers").³¹ *VVV* was created in 1957 as part of the activities that led up to the Moscow International Youth Festival. It was thus integrated into a quintessential socialist international event. It took place in front of a live audience. Random participants answered random questions for funny, token prizes. Its open-ended format and open-door policy made it a

28 Noémi Dóra Dankovics, "Játékmesterek és vetélkedőműsorok a magyar televíziózás történetében" [Quiz Show Hosts and Game Shows in the History of Hungarian Television] (PhD diss., Budapest College of Communication and Business, 2012).

29 Christine Evans, *Between Truth and Time: A History of Soviet Central Television* (New Haven, 2016).

30 Ibid.

31 Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time*, 246.

remarkably liberal phenomenon on 1950s Soviet TV. The producers assumed little control over who or what appeared on stage.³²

The successor program, *KVN*, launched in 1961 as a monthly broadcast, was more overtly guided by socialist principles of democratic education. At the same time, it was enabled by a web of pro-competition ideologies, which underscored the functioning of Soviet society: the pre-Soviet, nationalistic, Romantic elitism of a creative class, the cultivation of work and the Stalinist legacy of competitive labor within factory and agricultural production; and the competition against the seductions of capitalist media. *KVN* followed a format similar to *VVV* but with more centralized control over the rules: the participants, all students and almost all men, engaged in a contest of wit and satire, including plenty of improvisation. The format also lent itself to political satire, although it was heavily censored on the spot.³³ The competition was organized by leagues, with early matches leading to playoffs, culminating in the annual championship round.³⁴ Teams were led by a captain, with members specializing in tasks that best matched their individual talents.³⁵ *KVN* offered a microcosm of the hierarchical, militaristic, and sports-like organization of the socialist public sphere, led by male heroes. This was not so much because women could not be leaders but because they were not thought of as funny or witty. As Kristin Roth-Ey sums it up, “*KVN* delivered a neat and useful package by design: ‘the thinking person on the screen’ (a male figure marked universal) as a model for Soviet viewers.”³⁶ The program inspired regional competitions among *KVN* teams in factories, schools, agricultural collectives, the armed forces, and many other groups. Thus, it significantly fostered youth mobilization and mass recreation. Some *KVN* stars became celebrities. The program was discontinued in 1972 but was resurrected during *glasnost* and is still broadcast in Russia.

Such instances of offscreen mobilization around a competitive TV program were common in the region. A 1965 Hungarian program called *Csak egy kicsit jobban* (“Just a Little Bit Better”) covered a competition among factories for the number and quality of their innovations. Another program from the same year, *Versengő városok* (“Competing Towns”) set towns in competition. The 1966 show *Forog az idegen* (“Spinning the Tourist”) staged a contest about tourism among nine regions. The 1970s *Fekete fehér, igen, nem* (“Black and White, Yes and No”) was a 15-month, 22-part competition in prime time among Budapest’s districts. The winner, District XI, was

32 Evans, *Between Truth and Time*.

33 *Ibid.*, 253.

34 *Ibid.*

35 Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time*, 257.

36 *Ibid.*, 259.

awarded a fully equipped preschool. As a commentator enthused after the final, “Along the way, the noble goal ceased to be the 5-million-forint preschool; that became only a symbolic prize compared to the mass collaboration of historic significance.”³⁷

The German Democratic Republic was another major laboratory of socialist competition. In fact, the entire history of GDR TV can be seen in terms of increasing competition for its own audiences against the lure of West German TV.³⁸ This is why TV historians have argued that German TV history can only be written as a combined and comparative account of Eastern and Western developments.³⁹ The demand for entertaining content presented itself earlier and more urgently for GDR television than elsewhere in the Soviet camp. In 1967, GDR TV’s Department of Entertainment issued guidelines that discouraged aesthetic experiments that were too intellectually demanding and were to be avoided.⁴⁰ At the 8th congress of the GDR Socialist Unity Party (SED) in 1971, Party Secretary Erich Honecker famously diagnosed “a certain boredom” around television and urged programmers to create TV content that was “good entertainment.” The SED thus folded entertainment into its ideology as an important condition for reproducing labor and raising intellectually active individuals. This form of entertainment was still to be distinctly socialist, unlike the “pseudo entertaining measures” employed by capitalist media, which lacked a “positive, character-forming and culturally educating component.”⁴¹ GDR TV chairman Heinz Adameck put these new guidelines into practice, phrasing the initiative in the language of competition and even war: the task was to keep people in the line of fire in order to increase their socialist awareness and prevent them from turning to West German channels.⁴²

The GDR tried to incorporate West German TV into its own programming and pitted popular Western shows against its own most successful products. This was especially important in the week’s high viewing times.⁴³ In Friday prime time, the beginning of the weekend, GDR TV showed thrillers, as well as popular clips from old movies, as part of the variety show *Rumpelkammer*. Saturday night was reserved for variety shows (such as *Ein Kessel Buntes*), competing with ZDF’s and ARD’s programming. Sunday night was important in influencing the following week’s mood, so they broadcast the popular thriller serial *Polizeiruf 110* dramas and feature films, as well as variety shows and game shows such as *Schaetzen Sie mal* (“Take a Guess”).⁴⁴

37 Vera Vajk, “Fekete fehér, igen, nem,” *Népszava*, February 17, 1970.

38 Claudia Dittmar, “GDR Television in Competition with West German Programming,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 24, no. 3 (2004): 327–43, here 328.

39 *Ibid.*, 317.

40 Uwe Breitenborn, “‘Memphis Tennessee’ in Borsendorf: Boundaries Set and Transcended in East German Television Entertainment,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 24, no. 3 (2004): 391–402, here 392.

41 Ruediger Steinmetz and Reinhold Viehoff, “The Program History of Genres of Entertainment on GDR Television,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 24, no. 3 (2004): 317–25, 320.

42 Dittmar, “GDR Television,” 322.

43 *Ibid.*, 337.

44 *Ibid.*, 336.

East German quiz and game shows were strategically important in this relationship of competitive co-dependence. There were themed programs with specific demographics in mind such as *Glück auf!* (“Good Luck!,” 1957-68) about workers; *Das Grosse Spiel!* (“The Great Game,” 1963) about sports; and *Die Augen — links!* (“Eyes Left!,” 1967-69) about the army. *Wer raet mit — wer gewinnt* (“Who Guesses — Who Wins?,” 1952-54) and *Sehen-Raten-Lachen* (“Seeing, Guessing, Laughing,” 1955-57) were some of the first live shows with a studio audience. *Da Lacht der Bär* (“What Makes the Bear Laugh,” 1955-65), *Amiga-Cocktail* (1958-64) and *Zwischen Frühstück und Gänsebraten* (“Between Breakfast and Roast Goose,” 1959-91) were also popular live variety-game shows. Several of these developed from radio programs. *Da Lacht der Bär* featured a trio of hosts from Berlin, Saxony, and the Rhineland, respectively. Their jokes wove together popular tunes (*Schlager*), comedy, acrobatics, and operettas. The variety show *Jetzt schlägt Dreizehn* (“That’s the Last Straw,” 1961) celebrated the building of the Berlin Wall and included live conversations with border guards.⁴⁵

With the genre of the game show, socialist TV found a balance between providing educational content and an entertaining format. While socialist television programs participated in the circulation of European and American game show formats, for the most part they adapted these formats to the stricter moral codes of socialist citizen training. The 1970s–1980s brought about what popular “quiz master” István Vágó, the creator and host of numerous quiz and game shows for Hungarian TV, called the golden age of the genre.⁴⁶ The golden age issued a threat to the equilibrium between the official ideologies of state socialism and the “capitalist” properties of most game show formats. These programs, after all, whipped up competition, fostered a desire for consumer goods, and revolved around individual talents rather than democratic participation. Indeed, when commercial television broke up Western European public broadcasters’ monopoly in the 1970s, the ensuing dual-system broadcasting also pushed socialist game shows to become less educational, more commercialized, and even more popular than before.

Nevertheless, while some late socialist quiz and game show formats incorporated entertaining elements and mobilized bottom-up, inclusive, off-the-air competitions, they were aspirational, relentlessly wedded to the idea that TV should feature people who are better, smarter, and more competitive than ordinary viewers. Vágó claims he experienced the shift from the ethos of socialist quiz and game shows

45 Breitenborn, “‘Memphis Tennessee,’” 391.

46 István Vágó, interview by Anikó Imre, December 18, 2013.

to that of global formats most directly in his own persona as a host. Under socialism, his inclination was to help contestants, to be their benevolent, if condescending, coach and teacher. By contrast, post-socialist, global formats required him to learn to be the contestants' enemy, rooting against their success.⁴⁷

Conclusion

While the patronizing intention to guide a “gullible population” towards a utopian future undoubtedly prevailed throughout socialist TV's history, this is not a narrative of failure. It is also one of experimentation with creating collective value, with socializing individuals to educate themselves in ways that were community-oriented. The genres and programs born out of this experimentation were often playful and creative, deploying aesthetic formats that were problematic for and critical of socialism. The number of boring, propagandistic programs should not overshadow the bright achievements that punctuate this history and resonate even today.

There is renewed momentum to revisit these experiments now that neoliberalism seems to have run its course. Surveying the contemporary post-socialist media landscape provides stark evidence of the losses that attended the end of socialist TV. In the past ten to fifteen years, neo-authoritarian parties in Russia, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia have been using public money to consolidate media holdings among their loyal oligarchic networks, including television channels, local and national print media, and Internet sites. These centralized media networks are not unlike late socialist networks in their structure and politics, except for being more slick and powerful. By accumulating economic power, concentrating ownership, and silencing opposition, they are able to ensure the uniformity of news and restrict access to alternative news.

However, these media operations do not simply emulate socialist television's paternalistic attitude. While they build on the familiar authoritarian infrastructure, and the ethos of nationalism, they have replaced socialism's educational approach and communal orientation with divisive, carefully coordinated fear campaigns, embedded in depoliticized entertainment content that is largely a mix of home-produced material and US imports. In an ironic twist, in a time of countless competing terrestrial, cable, and over-the-top streaming services and widely available broadband that links most citizens to the Internet, state news media in the former socialist countries has

47 Ibid.

propagated a sense of willful nationalistic isolation. By contrast, while socialist TV and radio held a broadcasting monopoly through the mid-1980s, it was far from insulating or isolated in its operations in most countries. Rather, similar to Western European public broadcasting, it was thoroughly networked through both Warsaw Pact and Europe-wide collaborations, broadcast exchanges, television diplomacy, and a constant flow of know-how, technology, and personal connections.⁴⁸ The post-socialist recentralization of television around ruling parties' oligarchic networks holds up a dystopian mirror image to late socialist TV.

Perhaps it is not entirely coincidental that the arrival of cable and satellite technologies, and the rapid globalization of international media markets under a US-led neoliberal agenda of economic domination happened exactly at the same time as the disintegration of the Soviet empire. Socialist TV's broadcast monopoly allowed it to position itself as an extension of the family, a national institution within the home. As such, it did manage to foster a shared ethos and give viewers a sense of belonging even if this sense was at least partially built on the mockery of aggressively educational programs and the increasing awareness of the system's failure to deliver on its lofty goals.

Given this context, post-socialist nostalgia is far more complicated than a near-visceral yearning for the false sense of safety derived from the memory of socialism, fetishistically attached to public personas or consumer products of the past. Instead, nostalgia indicates the disruption of a sense of intimate sociality caused by the collapse of a centralized system of governance and the influx of globalization. This disruption of communality, by definition, has been national at its core. Rather than an ideological framework that is aligned with — and lends an institutional and affective structure to — the everyday management of socialism's utopian trajectory, nationalism in post-socialist countries has increasingly functioned as a self-protective security blanket against the threat of perpetual expansion that propels neoliberal market logics. Unlike socialist ideology, which constantly revealed its own shortcomings and had to be periodically adjusted to sustain some semblance of credibility, the logic of neoliberal markets, along with the mantra of freedom and democracy, is experienced as an irresistible, almost biologically driven evolution through competition towards an eventual future.⁴⁹ Rather than fostering a sense of community and security, market competition generates anxiety and hopelessness. Crisis and depression, which have been identified

48 See, e.g., Anikó Imre, *TV Socialism* (Durham, 2016), 12–19.

49 John Clarke, "After Neoliberalism? Markets, States and the Reinvention of Public Welfare" *Cultural Studies* 24, no. 3 (2010): 375–94.

as constitutive elements of neoliberalism, rather than exceptional states, align with neoliberalism's signature structures of feeling on an individual level.⁵⁰

It is not surprising that post-socialist identities, unmoored from the manageable context of livable socialism, have been recruited in the service of nationalistic party politics as well as commercial profits.⁵¹ This anxious attachment to nationalism as the last, recognizable resort of collectivity has been evacuated of exactly those enduring values of socialism that television, at its best, conveyed and confirmed: the values of communality, the dignity of work, education, and art.

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⁵⁰ See, e.g., Clarke, "After Neoliberalism?"; Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York, 2007); Julie Wilson, *Neoliberalism*, Abingdon-on-Thames, 2018).

⁵¹ Dominic Boyer likens post-socialist nostalgia to Bakhtin's heteroglossia to illustrate its complexity. See Dominic Boyer, "From Algos to Autonomos: Nostalgic Eastern Europe as Postimperial Mania," in *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, ed. Todorova and Gille, 17-28, 19. See also Zala Volčič and Mark Andrejevic, "Commercial Nationalism on Balkan Reality TV," in *The Politics of Reality Television: Global Perspectives*, ed. Kraidy Marwan and Katherine Senders, 113-26 (London, 2010).