

Conjuring the bad object? New writing on television in socialist Eastern Europe

Christine Evans, *Between Truth and Time: A History of Soviet Central Television*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. 360 pp., illus. ISBN: 9780300208436. \$85.00.

Anikó Imre, *TV Socialism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016. 328 pp., illus. ISBN 9780822360858. \$27.95.

Sabina Mihelj and Simon Huxtable, *From Media Systems to Media Cultures: Understanding Socialist Television*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 369 pp., illus. ISBN 9781108422604. \$120.00

Television is the love-to-hate medium. Or, in the more erudite formulation of historian Michele Hilmes (by way of psychoanalytic theory), TV is the “bad object” of academe.¹ Frustrating and alluring, ontological uncertainty rubs against its heels like a cat: what *is* TV, after all? Is it a text, a technology, an institution, a way of life? On a more practical level, too, the case against studying television history has always been unusually strong: depending on the context (era, country), researchers find themselves with either far

¹ Michele Hilmes, “The Bad Object: Television in the American Academy,” *Cinema Journal* 45, 1 (2005): 111-117. See also Jérôme Bourdon, “Is the End of Television Coming to an End?,” *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture* 7, 13 (2018): 1-15.

too much TV programming to watch or too little; the form is too fleeting and trivial or, again depending on the context, too obvious and predictable, *unworthy*. Socialist television has appeared, if anything, even more overdetermined to scholarly eyes-- the bad object's bad object-- and was, for many years, almost completely overlooked.² Yet in the past decade, a new cohort of scholars has switched on the box in histories of socialist Eastern Europe with meticulously researched, innovative studies.³ Add in to the mix some excellent new work on the TV/politics nexus in today's Russia, and the "bad object" may well, at last, make good.⁴

² Ellen Mickiewicz's work on Soviet television is the stand out exception, including three major monographs: *Media and the Russian Public* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1981); *Split Signals: Television and Politics in the Soviet Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); *Changing Channels: Television and the Struggle for Power in Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). See also the 1980-1990s work of John Downing and others in *Journal of Communication* (then edited by Marsha Siefert).

³ Relevant articles are too numerous to list, but we should note the launch of *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture*, the first peer-reviewed, multimedia, open access e-journal in the field. Monographs and edited volumes include: Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism After the 1968 Prague Spring* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010); Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire that Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Christina von Hodenberg and Ulrich Herbert, eds. *Media History after 1945: Journal of Modern European History* 10, 1 (2012); Aniko Imre, Timothy Havens, and Katalin Lustyik, eds. *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism* (London: Routledge, 2013); Peter Goddard, ed. *Popular Television in Authoritarian Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013). Heather Gumbert, *Envisioning Socialism: Television and the Cold War in the German Democratic Republic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014); Claudia Dittmar, *Feindliches Fernsehen: das DDR-Fernsehen und seine Strategien im Umgang mit dem westdeutschen Fernsehen*. Vol. 15. transcript Verlag, 2014; Kristin Roth-Ey and Larissa Zakharova, eds. *Communications and Media in the USSR and Eastern Europe: Technologies, politics, cultures, social practices: Cahiers du monde russe* 56, 2/3 (2015); Alexander Prokhorov and Elena Prokhorova, *Film and Television Genres of the Late Soviet Era* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2016); Kirsten Boenker, Julia Obertreis, and Sven Grampp, eds. *Television Beyond and Across the Iron Curtain* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016); Martin Stoll, *Television and Totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

⁴ Sarah Oates, *Television, Democracy and Elections in Russia* (London: Routledge, 2006); Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Ruylova, *Television and Culture in Putin's Russia: Remote Control* (London: Routledge, 2009); Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz, Nation, *Ethnicity and*

What do we learn tuning into this new wave of socialist television studies? One major theme in the new literature, and one that mirrors trends in writing about western European and American TV, is television's paradoxical transnationalism.⁵ Traditionally, media histories have been mounted in national frames; the intimate association between broadcasting, the nation-state, and national identity made this an obvious way to organize analysis. But television, like radio before it, has a rich history of international exchange, cooperation, co-optation, and leakage that historians everywhere have only recently begun to explore in detail. Television could be at once a bedrock of national cultures in the postwar period *and* a phenomenon that thrived on transnational traffic in people, concepts, and content.

Both Aniko Imre's *TV Socialism* and Sabina Mihlelj and Simon Huxtable's *From Media Systems to Media Cultures: Understanding Socialist Television* set their stalls squarely in the transnational camp, examining television right across the region, and both offer fascinating new information and some unexpected twists. Yes, TV administrators across socialist Eastern Europe shared ideas and coordinated activities, as we might expect. But some of them also developed significant, official connections across the East-West divide. Slovenian and Croatian TV, for example, set up cooperative arrangements with Italian RAI in the 1960s (Mihelj and Huxtable, 16). That socialist TV systems incorporated western programming into the daily schedules is well known. But seeing the percentage figures across the region

Race in Russian Television: Mediating Post-Soviet Difference (London: Routledge, 2015). In a popular vein, see Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014).

⁵ For a useful discussion, see Andreas Fickers and Catherine Johnson, "Transnational Television History: A Comparative Approach: Introduction," *Media History* 16, 1: 1-11.

cannot fail to impress: 43.6% of all imports to the GDR for the years 1960-1990, 65.5% for Poland, 83.1% for Romania (181). Much of this programming was American, and indeed, a cross-European analysis would show that in some years, American TV dominated screens *more* in the East than the West. And, of course, the unofficial leakage across borders – both within the socialist sphere (from Hungary, Bulgaria, and Serbia to TV-starved Romania in the 1980s, for instance) and between East and West – most famously, West Germany to the GDR, but also Italy to Croatia, Scandinavia to Estonia, Austria to Czechoslovakia, and others – often reached flood levels. Taken together, we get a view of television as a promiscuous, border-busting medium well before the introduction of international communications satellites in the late 1970s, traditionally seen as the game changer in the literature. Imre’s claim that “most of Europe was watching many of the same programs, often simultaneously” papers over key exceptions (crucially, the USSR, see below) and glosses over key asymmetries (17). Among other things, it seems important to recognize that while *Dallas* (USA, 1978-1991) was a quasi-universal across the continent, the *Thirty Cases of Major Zeman* (CSSR, 1976-1980) was not. With a few exceptions (children’s programming being the most important), only Eastern Europeans regularly watched Eastern European TV—and even then, the limitations were significant, as many socialist TV administrations rejected programming made by their allies as inappropriate for their own audiences (e.g. the GDR refused Hungarian shows as politically unreliable, the Soviets snubbed the Czechoslovak family dramas).⁶ Television’s contribution to a shared European cultural

⁶ Here I am drawing a distinction between socialist-made *shows* and socialist-produced content, such as documentary footage, used in news and current affairs programming and sports broadcasts. For examples of rejection, see Heather Gumbert, "Exploring Transnational Media Exchange in the 1960s," *VIEW: Journal of European Television History and Culture* 3, 5 (2014): 50-59; Evans on Soviet reservations about CSSR serials, 157. Valentin Lazutkin, recalling his work in TV imports, described the main criteria as “quality

imagination, East and West, was vital, but it was lopsided, and some might say part-colonized, decades before the wall came down.⁷

Imre and Mihelj and Huxtable are keen to explore the relationship between socialism and television across Eastern Europe - and socialism less as a state formation than as a way of life. For Imre, the stakes are explicitly political: in a bravura introduction, she frames her project as a kind of restorative justice: “socialist television conjured into legitimacy.” (2) By “taking television seriously,” she writes, we gain “access to an image of life under socialism, even a surprisingly good life at times, which the bipolar vision of the Cold War occludes.” (3) Mihelj and Huxtable are less campaigning, and their scope is far wider on the source level. Imre, true to her cultural studies background, structures the book around genres and is at her sharpest with textual analyses; Mihelj and Huxtable, a communications scholar-historian duo, look at a mighty range of sources, from textual, statistical (their work with schedule analysis is especially noteworthy) and archival through to oral history interviews, all of which they array before the reader with a forensic and, at times, bloodless precision. But interestingly, given the great differences in tone, their conclusions in many ways resonate, as they do with other recent literature on socialist TV, such as Heather Gumbert’s work on the GDR and Christine Evans’s *From Truth to Time: A History of Soviet Television*. Like Imre, Mihelj and Huxtable seek to introduce the socialist story to its rightful place in the annals of world television history and along with that, to use

and moral rectitude”, adding “We protected the people then. (*My togda oberegali narod*).” Vitalii Tret’iakov, ed. *Efir otechestva: sozdateli i zvezdy otechestvennogo televideniia o sebe i svoei rabote* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2010), 174.

⁷ This point is important to develop not only in terms of what I am calling “leakage”- the cross-border reception of programming—but also in terms of production and genre. The US commercial system and the BBC both had a hypertrophied impact on the development of genre format- what developed first in the US and the UK was adopted and adapted in other contexts.

television to talk about everyday life under socialism—to show “how media became involved in shaping cultural ideals and narratives and shaping everyday practices and routines” (294). In this way, “socialist television” becomes something more than the collection of programs on TV sets across the socialist world; it was a distinctive form, “a specific subtype of modern television,” that, although homologous with western European TV in many respects, also diverged in others and presents an alternative model (9).

The homologies are worth dwelling on for a moment, if only because some readers in the US may not be aware of just how much of an outlier American broadcasting was for most of the twentieth century. It was the public service model that constituted the norm worldwide: publicly funded broadcasting for mixed, nationwide audiences, committed to education and enlightenment as defined by an authorized elite, and to entertainment as a lesser function, often grudgingly admitted. Public service varied in implementation, to be sure, and was no absolute: commercial TV broadcasting came to the UK, often looked to as the gold standard for the public service model, with remarkable speed, already in 1955; and nearly every public system relied on American entertainment programming to feed the air, to a greater or lesser extent. But even so, the public service model remained a critical cultural referent, a foundational element in the very definition of “TV” worldwide well into the 1980s.

One of the great contributions of the new work on socialist television, then, is its care to situate socialist TV in this, its proper historical context. Mihelj and Huxtable propose we think in terms of “entangled modernities” within Eastern and Western Europe, and beyond - different media cultures grounded in different visions of society and politics, but sharing certain core ideas about human nature, the power of reason, and the nature of progress. (In this regard, they offer the comparative framework they develop in the book as

a model for analysing other modern media cultures worldwide.)⁸ Socialist television appears coherent in this light; it looks like a sensible system of answers to a predictable and common set of questions (or, perhaps, systems of answers, plural, as Mihelj and Huxtable also give a typology of three basic models of socialist TV).⁹ Imre, by contrast, also sets socialist television in its historical context but emphasizes its enduring and *extra*-ordinary engagement with public service values. Socialist TV in her account appears quixotic, often daring, and fraught; when it stumbles, it is over the very awkwardness of its own good intentions (the extra-ordinary again).¹⁰ Socialist television – and, indeed, all of socialist media culture- is marked, she repeatedly says, by a “schizophrenic quality”- an unresolved tension between the ideal viewer and real viewer, between the presumed public good and audience desire.¹¹ The analytical point is not really at odds with what we find in Mihelj and Huxtable, who cite Imre approvingly. But the character Imre conveys of socialist television, and of the socialist way of life, is. The sensibility is poles apart.

Perhaps one way to convey the difference is via their views of national cultures and audiences. On the one hand, we have Mihelj and Huxtable, who make a point of rejecting any straight line connection between media cultures and nation states, highlighting not only television’s inherent transnationalism, but also the complex, multi-national composition of many socialist states. They are interested in how television impacted people’s sense of the world around them (public and private space, everyday time, history) across the board; the

⁸ See especially chapter four of Mihelj and Huxtable (“Television and the Varieties of Modernity”).

⁹ In chapter three, they set out a typology of state socialist television systems of three models: market state socialist; reformist state socialist; hard-line state socialist.

¹⁰ “At their best, they were *more loyal* to the stated goals of public service broadcasting than the original Western European programs that may have inspired them.” Imre, 65. Italics mine.

¹¹ “Schizophrenia” appears in multiple connections: e.g. Imre, 24, 105, 144, 177.

book is packed with useful data on these questions; and socialist television, like the socialist television audience, emerges a sociological composite. Imre, on the other hand, describes TV across the region as a drama of nationalist and societal tensions, and its audience as something like a shrewd character actor: everyone is in on the play of socialist television – its didacticism and cultural elitism, its political taboos and defensiveness against various outsiders- and in this knowingness, she says, came a kind of collective, and prickly, sense of self. There are moments in *TV Socialism* when television seems to function like an officially-sponsored, guerrilla technique (more schizophrenia) for Eastern European national identity and, more specifically, for a regional anti-Soviet one. “Popular television,” she argues, “under the radar of official state culture, was a major facilitator of [this] anticolonial cultural nationalism and competition against the USSR” (87).¹²

It is a stimulating point, but also one that in some ways cuts against the grain of a study that sets out to synthesize. Imre’s most incisive analyses are nearly all of Hungarian television, which she knows best, and the book toggles between discussing socialist TV as a regional Eastern European phenomenon that implicitly excludes the USSR and an ideological/institutional one that mostly includes it. What to do with Yugoslavia is also unclear, as it is in Mihelj and Huxtable; their most richly documented examples of socialist TV are often taken from the Yugoslav case, yet they also shine a bright light on the many ways Yugoslav TV-- segmented at the republic level, semi-commercial (in some areas, very commercial)—stood out in the region. Yugoslav elites may have been as ideologically resistant to capitalist mass culture as their counterparts in the USSR, as Mihelj and Huxtable tell us, but TV screens in Yugoslavia did not reflect an equivalence: the figures for imported

¹² Imre, 87. See also Aniko Imre, “The Imperial Legacies of Television within Europe,” *Television & New Media* 18, 1 (2017): 3-18.

programming alone- 27.8% in Yugoslavia versus 5.2% in the USSR (1960-1990) are indicative of a very different televisual sphere, itself related to a very different politics (128, 181).¹³ In other ways, both GDR TV-- a national system developed in direct competition with an ideologically hostile, national alternative—and Bulgarian TV- which had at one point made every Friday night *Soviet* TV night -- look like outliers in the region as well.¹⁴

The whole problem of definitions, and of definers, is an enduring one in both of these works. What makes something “socialist TV,” after all, or “TV socialism”? (Again, is it text, technology, institution, way of life? In primitive terms: is *Dallas* watched on a made-in-the GDR/USSR/CSSR etc. screen *socialist* TV culture, or something else?) Mihelj and Huxtable try to work through the problem by identifying distinctive attitudes to things like space and time in socialist TV, and Imre by targeting genre. But it is not hard to find strong parallels with other televisions, other contexts, and sometimes the authors point them out themselves. What Mihelj and Huxtable categorize as socialist television’s “semi-truncated public sphere,” for example, looks a lot like what pertained in authoritarian, single-party states at the time, such as Spain; festive programming and populist historical adventure series were staples outside socialist Eastern Europe; television’s ritualistic nature and its norm-setting, stabilizing functions in everyday life are themes in the wider media historiography as well. Then, too, the thought of Eastern European broadcasters turning up their noses up at their political allies’ TV wares, as they did, only underscores the problem of just what we are getting at when we seek a general definition (beyond the geographic) of

¹³ The bulk of imports were western in origin.

¹⁴ Claudia Dittmar, "GDR television in competition with West German programming." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 24, 3 (2004): 327-343; Michael Meyen and Ute Nawratil, "The viewers: television and everyday life in East Germany," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 24, 3 (2004): 355-364.

“socialist TV.” In many ways, indeed, the differences among Eastern European broadcasters strike the reader as much as the similarities, and sometimes more.¹⁵

One of the leitmotifs of the new research on television is the power of popular demand to force change in media culture-- “negotiations between state and public” is how historian Christine Evans frames it in her impressive monograph on Soviet central television, *Between Truth and Time* (3). Unlike earlier work on socialist media, which focused primarily on public affairs, the new wave spotlights entertainment, with the assertion that, contrary to Cold War stereotype, socialist TV was not programmatically political across the board.¹⁶ What is more, the general picture is that socialist television was never particularly good at straight political messaging, but that as it developed, it did grow adept at merging propaganda and entertainment. (Imre and Mihelj and Huxtable use the term “edutainment” for this.) It is a point the socialist authorities endorsed, in their own idiom: “entertainment is also ideology,” to quote one Komsomol report in 1966.¹⁷ But the ways they endorsed it – the very different politics at work in very different contexts- had a dominating effect on

¹⁵ Censorship is one area where diversity of experience is striking. Imre’s finding that there was “little or no censorship- apart from extreme cases and period of dictatorship” in socialist television is flatly inapplicable to the USSR, and so to socialist television unless the USSR is defined as a permanent extreme case. Imre, 18-19.

¹⁶ In addition to Mickiewicz, see Alex Inkeles, *Public Opinion in Soviet Russia: A Study in Mass Persuasion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950, 1958); Gayle Durham Hollander, *Soviet Political Indoctrination: Developments in Mass Media and Propaganda Since Stalin* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972); Angus Roxburgh, *Pravda: Inside the Soviet News Machine* (New York: George Braziller, 1987); Thomas Remington, *The Truth of Authority: Ideology and Communication in the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988); David Wedgwood Benn, *Persuasion and Soviet Politics* (London: Blackwell, 1989).

¹⁷ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi sotsial’no-politicheskii arkhiv-m (RGASPI-m) fond 1, op. 34, d. 49, l. 28 (1966). “Zadachi komitetov komsomola po usileniiu rukovodstva molodezhnoi pechat’iu, redaktsiami radio i televideniia.”

what showed up on the screen. There were, in other words, always political options and political choices.

Evans argues that, in the Soviet case, there was a sea change in Soviet television in the second half of the 1960s, directly related to audience power: a new schedule that shunted what she calls “direct political messages and propaganda” to the sidelines and deliberately scheduled entertainment programming and popular news formats in prime time slots (weekends and evenings), the better to attract the widest popular audience (149). In a series of deftly argued chapters, Evans analyses the brightest stars in this twinkly new firmament – -- *Song of the Year*, *Time*, *Let’s Go*, *Girls!*, *KVN*, *What? Where? When?* and others-- as individual productions and as something more- as socio-political institutions that allowed for the expression of new ideas and emotions. What united them was a “persistent search for new ways of unifying a diverse public, legitimizing authority, and performing the state’s responsiveness to its citizens—all without recourse either to shared belief in a single ideology or to genuinely competitive elections” (2). In an intriguing epilogue, she sees in this Brezhnev-era mode the seeds both of glasnost-era television, with its radical, experimental populism, and of contemporary Russian TV’s central role in Putin’s “managed democracy.”

The audience is always a bit like electricity for media scholars: we know it exists, and we know it is vital- we can see other people putting it to use all over the map- and yet we all struggle to catch it, hold it, and make use of it ourselves. Historian Jérôme Bourdon argues that in fact “each methodology relying on one source produces its own audience”: media ethnographies produce “resistant, autonomous audiences,” while oral histories produce “audiences who incorporate media consumption into their life courses;” ratings generate

“masses of passive viewers,” and market research, consumers.¹⁸ Soviet media, as Evans and others have discussed, relied very intensively on viewer correspondence to assess their audiences, and for a short period in the 1960s, they also conducted sociological studies.¹⁹ Evans reads this sociological research very much in the vein of market research—as gathering information about consumer taste- and imputes great power to it. It was “Central Television’s “encounter with audience research,” she maintains, that prompted it to re-evaluate its goals and methods and led to a new approach to broadcasting that flourished in the 1970s and ‘80s (49). Hence, the star programs she analyses were responses to audience demand that managed to marry entertainment and ideology in a successful package.

Evans’s portrait of the shift in television as of the late 1960s dovetails well with the image we find in other new wave studies. If nothing else, it seems clear that overall TV in Eastern Europe *got better* over time: more skilful, more professional, and affording new routes for innovation. This in itself is a valuable crack at the idea of “stagnation” as the essence of late Soviet (socialist) culture—now under active demolition, in multiple arenas, for several years.²⁰ But it is also, in another sense, just what we might expect of a creative industry after years of expansion, growth in expertise, and technical advances. The evidence

¹⁸ Jérôme Bourdon, “Detextualizing: How to write a history of audiences,” *European Journal of Communication* 30, 1: 17.

¹⁹ See Kirsten Boenker, ““Dear Television Workers...”. TV Consumption and Political Communication in the Late Soviet Union,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 56, 2-3 (2015): 371-399; Simon Huxtable, “In search of the soviet reader. The Kosygin reforms, sociology, and changing concepts of Soviet society, 1964-1970.” *Cahiers du monde russe* 54, 3-4 (2013): 623-642; Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time*; Mickiewicz, *Media and the Russian Public*.

²⁰ Natalya Chernyshova, *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era* (London: Routledge, 2013); Dina Fainberg and Artemy Kalinovsky, eds., *Reconsidering Stagnation in the Brezhnev Era: Ideology and Exchange* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016); Juliane Fürst, “Where Did All the Normal People Go? Another Look at the Soviet 1970s,” *Kritika* 14, 3 (2013): 621–40; Polly Jones, “The Fire Burns On? The “Fiery Revolutionaries” Biographical Series and the Rethinking of Propaganda in the Brezhnev Era.” *Slavic Review* 74.1 (2015): 32-56.

for audience power is indirect: in effect, Evans reads back from the programs themselves and from the changes in the schedule that showcased them.²¹ But as she also notes, television producers had been pushing innovations in programming for years (on their own terms and quite apart from sociological research), just as Soviet television viewers had been complaining about boring programs for years as well, and would continue to do so. The changes in Soviet TV culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s can be readily attributed to the perceived imminent threat of international satellite broadcasting into the USSR, the trauma of the Prague Spring for the Soviet leadership, and to the exceptional agency of Sergei Lapin, the new head of Gosteleradio as of 1970, and his views—that is, to political choices or, what Evans describes at one point in the book as “the real powers behind Soviet television- its censors in Glavlit and the Central Committee apparat” (218). Rudol’f Boretskii, whom Evans cites as one of the most influential figures in the discussion around scheduling policy in the 1960s (48), was castigated by Lapin in person (and subsequently blacklisted) for drawing the inspiration for his ideas on scheduling from foreign, specifically, capitalist television systems.²² The link to audience demand is uncertain.

Mihlej and Huxtable’s inspired spadework with schedules shows that, East Germany aside, the share of programming designated as entertainment did not, in fact, increase over the decades (131, 133). Perhaps mixed-mode edutainment did--the case is strong-- but looking at the various iterations of TV called “socialist” across the region prompts questions about the power of any audience to exercise power, particularly in the systems they identify as “hard-line” in their typology. There, TV staff faced audiences no less eager for

²¹ Paulina Bren adopts a similar approach in *The Greengrocer and His TV*.

²² Boretskii does not refer to audience research as a guiding force in his concepts in his memoirs. Rudol’f Boretskii, *Nachalo: k istorii TV: vypavshee zveno, ili Moe zabytoe televidenie* (Moscow: VK, 2010).

entertainment than those in those in “market” and “reformist” systems, and no less vocal in their complaints. Yet their moves in the direction of popular taste were marginal by comparison; not only did they fail to meet their audiences halfway; sometimes they refused to leave the starting gates. Romania went from broadcasting a slew of American programs in the late 1960s and early 1970s to a total blackout on imports in the 1980s and, along with it, a drastic cut in broadcast time to two-three hours per day, mostly in black-and-white, devoted overwhelmingly to the activities of the ruling couple.²³ It is an extreme example, but it points to the ground rules for state-public negotiations in all the socialist states, even the most reformist. The people in charge of socialist television did pay attention to audiences; and they also did what they wanted.

Thirty-plus years ago, Ellen Mickiewicz undertook her own pioneering excavation of the Soviet TV schedule and found that fully 41% of the broadcast day was devoted to news and information programming.²⁴ Mihlej and Huxtable categorize programs a little differently, separating information and news, but even if we suppose that only news (the smaller category of the two), had propagandistic content, their conclusion that “everyday television in Eastern Europe was largely devoid of explicitly propagandistic programming” (219) reads like overreach. As Evans explains, at least for Soviet television, “all... entertaining content, from serial films to game shows to musical contests had explicit, if indirect political objectives” (81). Mickiewicz’s analysis further brings out the signal importance of feature films to Soviet TV, both in terms of their share of the schedule (29%)

²³ Alexandru Matei and Annemarie Sorescu-Marinković. "The exceptionalism of Romanian socialist television and its implications." *Panoptikum* 20 (2018): 168-192.

²⁴ Mickiewicz, *Split Signals*, 151. The sample was of one week on the first channel in 1986.

and of the stated preferences of viewers.²⁵ A long-term view would also make clear the great repetitiveness of the schedule, particularly when it came to feature film.²⁶

Mickiewicz's sample, a week in 1986, included *Battleship Potemkin*, one war horse in a large scheduling stable. The whole world was watching *Chapaev* not only in the 1930s...but also in the '60, '70s, and '80s: many Stalin-era classics like *Chapaev* never left the screen.²⁷

Programs like *Let's Go, Girls!*, *Song of the Year*, *With All My Heart*, and so on aired once a month or less. As Evans explains, they were event TV, and the enthusiasts who made these programs did have a strong sense of themselves as innovators in a long line that stretched back to the days of the Soviet avant-garde. But the cat is at the heels again: is socialist television the best and most innovative programs that played on TV, or those broadcasts with the largest audiences (not always one and the same); is it the most typical programming, on a statistical level, or the ensemble of programming, known as flow?; is it, perhaps, the day-to-day state of living your life with the bad object in the corner?

The tension between seeing TV broadcasting through the exceptional—programs people tune in to watch—versus the ordinary – programs people watch, or maybe semi-watch and talk over (fall asleep to, etc.) because they are *there*- is latent in any work on the

²⁵ Ibid. The percentage of film on regional television stations was even higher: 40-50%. E. Ia. Dugin, "Tipologiiia programm mestnogo televideniia" (Avtoreferat, Fakultet zhurnalistiki, kafedra televideniia i radioveshchaniia MGU, 1977).

²⁶ Because films often ended up being used when there were problems with censorship- the so-called "reserve" film- the proportion of cinema in the overall TV diet was even higher. Rudol'f Boretskii, *Televizionnaia programma: ocherk teorii propagandy* (Moscow: NMO GKRT, 1967), 106.

²⁷ See Maya Turovskaya on the importance of considering options- and the *lack of options*- when drawing conclusions about audience taste. Maya Turovskaya, "The Taste of Soviet Moviegoers during the 1930s," in Thomas Lahusen and Gene Kuperman, eds. *Late Soviet Culture: From Perestroika to Novostroika* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993): 95-107. Letter writers to Central TV often mentioned the repetitive film screenings and asked for more film and more recent films.

medium. We need not choose between the two; television can be both. But the tension itself is worth exploring. We should avoid the trap of assuming consumption is always a straight metric for either taste or values. Reading the new wave studies, it is clear that exposure to western programming did not automatically translate into pro-western political views, and exposure to homegrown socialist programming did not make people socialist true believers, either. Imre argues that Eastern European viewers developed an ironic sensibility about television—or rather, about the gap between the way the world looked on TV and the “actual experiential realities of socialism” (9) Mihlej and Huxtable and Evans discuss the ways television viewing operated as ritual practice, helping to mark out and make sense of the late socialist normal.

But what if we rode the wave further to imagine that viewers watched programs they did *not* like and which were *not* always sensible or useful to them?; TV they loved to hate, or just plain hated and watched anyway?; TV that itched? The motivations for watching in these cases would be varied: to experience a sense of singularity, or superiority, to learn by de-coding, or reading between the lines, to time-travel, to space-travel, to feel oneself part of a community, to be distracted, to get riled up or get through the day, to tune out your mother-in-law, to go to sleep, and many more. Mapping these motivations and the diverse experiences of specific programs is no longer possible now (though no doubt more in-depth oral history work could provide some insights). But pinning things down in this way is unnecessary in any event; we need no precise roadmap to explore television in terms beyond satisfaction/dissatisfaction, acceptance/rejection, efficacy/dysfunction. We can use the new wave of television studies to conjure multiples logics of production and consumption, and to think about the edges of that logic, those TV itches people once loved to scratch, in the states of socialist Eastern Europe.

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