

Why Do We Need to Talk about Socialism and TV?

This book is not simply about socialist television. It is, however, very much about socialism *and* television. Socialism does not only designate a historical period here. It is also key to uncovering pieces of a globalized TV history that complement and challenge mainstream Anglo-American TV histories on the one hand and question some of our received wisdom about the Cold War on the other. Throughout, the emphasis falls on how television and socialism function as windows into each other. What do we learn about socialism when we examine it through the medium of television? And what do we learn about television as a global medium when we take into account its operation during almost four decades of state socialism in Europe? To answer these questions, I foreground the temporal continuity between socialism and postsocialism, as well as their joint historical roots in presocialist eras, and explore the geographical and cultural interconnections around television within a Europe embedded in a globalized media network.

I see “socialist television” as a necessary construction whose geographical boundaries stretch beyond the Soviet Empire and whose histories are both anchored in presocialist cultures and continue into postsocialism, never in isolation from the world of liberal capitalism even in the most

isolated places and times. As Heather Gumbert writes in her history of early East German television, the historical experiment of socialism is so profoundly rooted in the history of modernity that socialism and liberal capitalism cannot be disentangled.¹ But the ultimate goal is far from assimilating the history of Eastern European socialist TV into that of Western European social democracies. It is, to borrow Sabina Mihelj's words, to think of socialist television "as a specific subtype of modern television, designed to promote an alternative vision of modernity, modern belonging, economics and culture."² Socialist TV certainly registered the socialist system's failures. Equally important, however, it also recorded its forgotten successes, reminding us of the viability of visions that diverge from the current monopoly of neoliberal capitalism on what constitutes the good life.³

Why is "socialist television" a *necessary* construction? Over the past four decades, television studies have created influential paradigms that span multiple disciplines and methodologies. However, the field has remained mostly confined to American and Western European academic hubs and developed with reference to television systems embedded in capitalist economies: the commercial system that has dominated television in the United States, the public service broadcasting system that dominated Western European and Commonwealth states until recently, and various combinations between the two. This book introduces television during and after state socialism in the former Soviet satellite states into television studies. Conversely, it introduces television studies into academic fields concerned with socialist and postsocialist Eastern European cultures and the Cold War in general. This dual merger requires that socialist television be conjured into legitimacy first before we can refine and deconstruct its parameters and evaluate how it changes the parameters of global television and (post)socialist studies.

While socialist television as such needs to be construed practically from scratch, socialism as an ideology and world system itself has been rapidly forgotten, delegitimized, or reduced to nostalgic clichés since the 1990s. To mention just one example, in 2013 the American television network FX released *The Americans*, a drama series created by former CIA agent Joe Weisberg. Set in the 1980s, the series portrays a Russian couple living a double identity as undercover KGB agents who masquerade as perfectly assimilated suburban Americans. The publicity image on the show's website features the couple, played by Keri Russell and Matthew Rhys, in the style of a communist propaganda poster. They stare into the bright communist

future with the blind commitment of the brainwashed, holding weapons across their chests as if ready to defend their ideology at a moment's notice and at any cost, framed by the familiar halo of Leninist sun rays (brought to you by Coors Light in prominently placed ads across the screen on the FX site). As I began watching the show, it quickly turned out that the creators had little interest in the Soviet Union other than as a background that triggers American nostalgia for the Cold War. The Cold War is, in fact, reduced to the campy imagery and simplistic historical perspective of its favored genre, the spy drama. I realize, of course, that it is not television's job to teach history. Nevertheless, television does teach us about how American culture sees the history and historical fate of socialism: utterly dismissed and rightfully demonized as a political and economic system. It is stripped down to a few cartoonish images unmoored from their historical context, which are as weightless as Coors Light, and propelled by the very force of nostalgia that brought them back to life.⁴

As researchers have lamented across the disciplines, the end of the Cold War in 1989 has not generated increased interest in understanding its history.⁵ Instead, the "superpower approach" continues to dominate scholarship. This approach simplifies Cold War relations as an ideological battlefield of confrontations between the Soviet Union and the United States, conducted across a near-impenetrable Iron Curtain. Sari Auto-Sarasmö and Katalin Miklóssy make a case for reassessing this frozen bipolar state of affairs in light of ample evidence of multileveled interactions among a variety of institutions and individuals, rather than just state actors. Their collection, *Reassessing Cold War Europe*, includes case studies of a number of such east-west technological, scientific, economic, and cultural exchanges.⁶ It joins several other publications that have explored the everyday life of socialism, inherently defying Cold War stereotypes of a repressive, isolated, joyless gray bloc. This work has been produced mostly by historians and anthropologists who wish to "culturalize" their fields.⁷

Taking television seriously grants access to an image of life under socialism, even a surprisingly good life at times, which the bipolar vision of the Cold War occludes. Television is a better platform for this historical revision than art films and literature, which were the preferred and often the only available sources that informed the world beyond the Iron Curtain about life in really existing socialism. Even in the most sympathetic and discerning hands, much of art film and literature tended to serve up proof that socialism was depressing, doomed, and defunct. As I argue in detail elsewhere, the reason for this was that these high cultural accounts

were produced by and for the most part also *for* intellectuals and artists who were already part of a cosmopolitan circulation of talent. To put it simply, Eastern intellectuals used their national informant status to deliver to Western audiences what those audiences wanted to hear about the oppressed, backward, and exotic East of socialism, in a pattern of self-orientalization that is still largely unacknowledged in Europe.⁸

As I show in this book, television has been a more reliable barometer of the political, economic, and cultural life of socialism. In the most obvious sense, it was an institution that lived in the intersection of the public and domestic spheres, between top-down attempts at influencing viewers and bottom-up demands for entertainment. Where much of art and literature informs us of the relationship between the party leadership and the intellectual elite, TV gives us a sense of the real complexity of the relationship between the party leadership and the public. By virtue of its cross-border production, circulation, and consumption, television also challenges the national containment of these exchanges.

In a less obvious way, television also grants us access to subtle but all the more significant divisions within the “public” that both socialist ideology itself and Cold War discourses about socialism have envisioned as homogeneous. Instead of confirming the blanket oppression of the people by authoritarian or dictatorial leaders, the history of television highlights the more fluid workings of micro-oppressions and exclusions: of women, of nonnormative sexualities, of foreigners, of the Roma and other nonwhite populations. These exclusions were and continue to be embedded in the very structure of nationalism that socialist TV adopted from Western public broadcasters. However, thanks to the unpredictable, home-based, entertainment-oriented workings of television, at times they failed to be enforced in a straightforward fashion.

(Post)socialist TV and Television Studies

Given the indispensable role of television in navigating between the official and unofficial spheres throughout and after socialism, one needs to ask why the medium has been ignored by scholars of (post)socialism. Until very recently, it seems that all possible academic fronts have been united in their resistance to taking television seriously. In Slavic and Eastern European studies, where researchers have the necessary linguistic and cultural competence to search the archives and watch programs, television has long been relegated to the status of a “bad” object, following a

Eurocentric hierarchy of high and low culture also embraced by Eastern European intellectual and political elites. Within Europe, much of the postsocialist media region has recently been folded into the European Union's strategy of creating an integrated, competitive European audiovisual arena. At the same time, media expansion and the flow of programming has remained one-directional, west to east. Academic assessments of postsocialist media change, mostly in communication studies, have favored issues of regulation and institutional shifts and have included television only as part of large-scale media transformations rather than as a cultural-political institution. While this kind of work is undoubtedly important, it has maintained a nation-state framework and an exclusive interest in postsocialist developments. For the most part, it has ignored continuities between socialist and postsocialist television, intra-European flows during socialism, and television's role in shaping culture, desires, tastes, identities, and ideologies.

A major purpose of this book is to contribute to laying the foundations of socialist television histories, a vast and necessarily collective project only recently begun by scholars in research centers in Europe and scattered across the globe.⁹ There is a reason why, as Daniela Mustata writes, "there is a momentum for television histories from Eastern Europe" right now.¹⁰ Revisiting socialist television also inevitably rewrites European and global TV histories by virtue of questioning television's reigning national logic, as well as the Cold War divisions between East and West and between socialism and postsocialism. What emerges from this history is an alternative narrative of temporal and geographical continuity that validates the "regional" as a category of profound importance. The particular hybridities developed by socialist and postsocialist television outline, above all, a regional pattern, which is itself rooted in the shared imperial histories on which the region's television infrastructures were built and which programming trends, distribution patterns, and reception practices have perpetuated into the present day.

However, the main ambition of *TV Socialism* is neither drawing up a chronological history nor providing geographical coverage. This would be an impossible task for a single book, given the region's cultural and linguistic heterogeneity and the scope of the historical period in question. Rather, the book is organized according to a broadly conceived *generic* logic. Genre is understood here as a transcultural form of expression rather than a set of specific television genres, since socialist genres do not exactly overlap with those derived from Anglo-American television. For instance,

as I discuss in chapter 12, while there were very few American-style sitcoms produced during socialism, there was plenty of comedy on TV. In a similar vein, what I call “soap operas” in chapter 9 for lack of a better term were dramatic serials that shared some traits with American and Western European soaps but preferred a humorous, often satirical tone to sentimentality. Genre thus provides a platform of recognition and comparison between the categories of Western television studies and those of socialism while it also helps foreground the regional specificities of socialist TV. The generic grid makes socialist television accessible to readers unfamiliar with local cultures, let alone with specific television programs.

Each of the four parts of *TV Socialism* explores how a certain generic cluster’s aesthetic, political, and ideological dimensions functioned within socialist television. Each part concludes with a chapter that discusses how these dimensions have shifted since the end of the Cold War. The four broad generic categories—reality-based educational programming, historical and adventure series, dramatic series, and comedic programs—were selected based on the kinds of ideological and political roles they have performed on socialist and postsocialist television across the region.

The generic lens highlights the cultural-ideological and political-economic significance of the institution of television in a historical and regional perspective that supplements and counterbalances the recent preoccupation with the transformation of postsocialist media systems. However, the very complexity of television as an institution requires mobilizing the full range of possible approaches. Each chapter draws on media industry studies and cultural studies and incorporates available qualitative and quantitative research on socialist and postsocialist media industries and audiences, as well as archival sources. I also draw on extensive interviews I conducted with prominent Hungarian television professionals and archivists.

Every chapter also weaves together large-scale examinations of regional and continental trends within case studies of programs that illustrate these trends and generate surprising historical and theoretical insight. This comparative, genre-based approach reveals that the actual topography of socialist television is vastly different from the uniform propaganda programming into which the Cold War and its enduring legacy have frozen socialist media. Under the loose umbrella of ideological commitment to Soviet principles, one finds a variety of hybrid aesthetic and economic practices. These include frequent exchanges and collaborations within the region and with Western media institutions, a programming

flow across borders, a steady production of genre entertainment, borrowings from European public service broadcasting, the development of an underlying, constantly expanding commercial infrastructure, and trans-cultural, multilingual reception practices along shared broadcast signals in heavily populated border areas. Rather than scarcity, homogeneity, and brainwashing, *TV Socialism* conveys a mixture of recognition and strangeness, which should defamiliarize some of the basic questions and frameworks of television studies as well as our notions of socialism. It is these moments of defamiliarization and surprise around which the chapters are structured.

Surprise 1: Television's Ambivalent Status

Rather than an instrument of propaganda, television was a profoundly ambivalent medium in the hands of party authorities. Sabina Mihelj explains that, through the 1960s, mass, domestic television viewing remained a new phenomenon in Yugoslavia, which neither broadcasters nor politicians had yet learned to master. More centralized attempts at political control over television increased only in the 1970s.¹¹ Kristin Roth-Ey describes the postwar development of Soviet television as a messy process, which resists straightforward historical periodization and silver-bullet explanations. It proceeded by trial and error and was in no way determined by technological innovation. Its relationship to Soviet political tradition, to other arts, and to modern Soviet life in general, remained unsettled until the 1970s: "Television was in the paradoxical position of being celebrated and denigrated, pampered and ignored in its first formative postwar decades."¹²

As Hungarian media archivist Katalin Palyik succinctly put it, television was a medium without real owners.¹³ This echoes a statement by Richárd Nagy, president of Hungarian Television between 1974 and 1983. According to meeting minutes, in his oral report back to Television's leadership about his visit with party secretary János Kádár in 1979, Nagy said, "So I told [Kádár] that Hungary is a country where . . . every institution needs a—what do you call it?—a godfather. You know how it is. The Operetta Theater has someone. If they build a bridge, that has a godfather. If they build new apartments in the capital, those are sure to have someone. But television, and I think poor radio is the same, they don't belong to anyone."¹⁴ Nagy then explained that he had reminded Kádár that television was under the administrative sphere of "culture" in the government, yet it did not get the funding or legitimacy attached to other cultural branches

such as the film industry, or to those in the sphere of “communication,” despite being a crucial tool of communication and governance for the party:

We feel that they look down on us, these “kulturniks . . .” And this is why we feel that we don’t have a “godfather.” There is no one to support the cause of television. . . . We are Hungarian Television and not some private TV company. And there is only one of these in the Hungarian People’s Republic. And if there is only one of these, then someone should champion its cause. Because it seems that a canning factory has a minister who lobbies for it, a meat factory has another one, and a chicken factory yet another. But television doesn’t belong anywhere.¹⁵

The Hungarian case was far from unique. Socialist TV caused a great deal of confusion among authorities, professionals, and viewers throughout its history. This was particularly true in its early era. After experimental broadcasts in the interwar period, television was relaunched in most countries after the war in the mid-1950s, in synchronicity with similar developments in Western Europe. 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. Communist parties tried to mold the new medium to their own purposes: they developed centralized programming to standardize citizens’ everyday, domestic life rhythms. But they were also compelled to sever content from the actual experience of socialism, which invariably fell short of the idealistic picture delivered by party propaganda. In the early decades, this contradictory goal yielded cheerleading docufictions, educational programming, uplifting entertainment such as theatrical coverage of Russian and European classics, doctored news, and domestically produced dramatic serials focused firmly on the romanticized historical past rather than the present.¹⁶

By the late 1960s, when TV sets became the norm in households, socialist authorities had to reckon with television’s power as a mass medium. But party officials were never quite sure how to control or appropriate television and were thus relegated to playing catch-up. By the end of its first decade, viewers had already identified television as a medium of leisure. It had irrevocably absorbed elements from radio, which had incorporated the earlier legacy of “bourgeois” stage variety entertainment. This “bourgeois” element, most visible in television comedy (discussed in chapters 11

and 12), only became more pronounced through the 1970s and 1980s as socialism thawed. The gap between the projective ideals and the actual experiential realities of socialism sustained a layer of ironic distance between television and its viewers. 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. By the 1980s of late socialism, television had turned into the primary medium of parodic overidentification with official socialist rhetoric.¹⁷

Television's lower cultural status often allowed it to go under the radar of censorship. It also kept away writers and actors who were reluctant to be associated with such a light medium and preferred to work in film and literature—something constantly bemoaned by party executives and television's leadership. Despite its nominal centralization, television operated through a range of alternative approaches that were often ad hoc and subject to party functionaries' own peeves and preferences. Longtime party leaders' attitudes toward television best illustrate this pattern.

Leonid Brezhnev had programs made for him and his family by his appointed head of Soviet television, Sergey Lapin. Roth-Ey characterizes television in the Lapin era as a kind of court TV to the Kremlin, with Lapin as chief courtier.¹⁸ Lapin's TV issued a special address to politically important viewers in their homes. Brezhnev's house had two TV sets: a Soviet model for Brezhnev and his wife, and a Japanese model with a VCR for the younger generations.¹⁹ By contrast, as almost all of my interviewees told me, it was common knowledge in Hungarian Television that party secretary János Kádár did not watch TV at all.²⁰ Given his enormous political clout, Kádár's own cultural snobbery had a trickle-down effect, which allowed the head of television, almost invariably a sophisticated professional rather than an apparatchik, to make important programming and personnel decisions without party involvement.

In yet another telling case, in the 1970s Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu created a hospitable environment for importing entertaining U.S. series in order to demonstrate his independence from the Soviet Union and to gain favor with the West. In the 1980s, however, as his reign turned increasingly megalomaniac, he reduced television broadcasting to a few hours a week, which were all about himself and his family. This version of court TV was not simply made *for* the royal family; the family was virtually the only content.²¹ Erich Honecker, secretary of the East German Socialist United Party (SED), also single-handedly redefined television and redirected its history when he famously diagnosed “a certain boredom”

around television and urged its leaders to create “good entertainment” at the Eighth Congress of the SED in 1971. As a result, the SED folded entertainment into its ideology as an important condition for reproducing labor and raising intellectually active individuals.²²

Far from being just amusing anecdotes, these stories demonstrate the confusion television caused in the attitudes of the highest decision makers. They had to reconcile the political role of TV as a massive potential instrument of centralized control with the private and emotional relationship they themselves had with TV. This dual function had a direct effect on how television operated in socialist countries. Part of the political establishments’ and more prestigious cultural institutions’ hostility was fear of competition. As early as 1951, the Soviet Ministry of Cinematography lobbied the communist party to ban feature films on TV to prevent the loss of ticket sales at the movies. Theaters also tried to limit broadcast access to performances. Both efforts were unsuccessful, but the hierarchy remained in place.²³

At the same time, top-down hostility and confusion actually sustained television’s bottom-up momentum throughout the socialist period, giving viewers some leverage in defining the medium’s development. Television’s cultural stigma and subsequent low pay also allowed for laboratories of innovation to be formed, where the first creative professionals could invent television in a trial and error of jobs, technologies, and genres. This environment attracted young people who cared less about prestige than about new challenges. My interviews with Hungarian television professionals resonate with findings in other countries that television was an exciting place to work,²⁴ fueled by camaraderie, enthusiasm, and a sense of genuine collaboration, which spilled out into lasting friendships outside of work.²⁵

Surprise 2: Undiscovered Socialist Audiences

Recovering television from the shadow cast by intellectual snobbery and political confusion throws into question the enduring and near-exclusive attention to (dissident) literature, film, and samizdat journalism that has dominated academic approaches to socialist cultures. Television offers an alternative view, from the vantage point of everyday practices of socialism. These practices were motivated by discourses and desires that considerably muddy the entrenched idea of the binary opposition between official party-led cultures and dissident intellectual cultures. In fact, neither of these camps cared much about audiences. The real target audiences of art

films and high literature were other dissident intellectuals and educated, left-leaning Western publics. By contrast, television could not be made to function without actual viewers.

Determining what these viewers wanted or even watched is crucial to understanding socialist television and socialism through the lens of television. It is not an easy task, however. The scarcity and unreliability of both viewing data and viewer memories are obvious obstacles. Most socialist television industries established more or less developed audience research arms by the late 1960s. This was a vast improvement from counting viewer letters, let alone weighing the mailbag, which was the preferred method of measuring audience interest in early Soviet television.²⁶ But even empirical, survey-based audience research remained somewhat unreliable. In the Soviet Union, the surveys were often face-to-face rather than anonymous and contained leading questions.²⁷ This was not a Soviet specificity: while Western European public broadcasters were more invested in audience research since they had to justify their public support, their surveys also often created an aspirational, static, and passive national audience.²⁸

Another central and often overlooked problem is that the top-down confusion about the function and cultural value of television was also internalized by its viewers. Viewer letters to national broadcasters express a clear preference for entertaining programming such as quiz shows, pop music, comedy, and drama serials from the beginning. At the same time, interviews and personal conversations consistently reveal a gap between what people liked about socialist TV and what they thought they were supposed to like. Let me evoke just one of these conversations to illustrate a recurring pattern. On a recent flight I sat next to an elderly couple, both architects, who had left Hungary and settled in Southern California in the early 1980s. When I asked them about their favorite memories of socialist television (as has become my habit), they eagerly recognized some of the entertaining programs I mentioned but made sure to point out to me how excellent socialist TV's live broadcasts of classical music concerts were. Then, without missing a beat, they proceeded to rave about their current favorites: *Homeland*, *Shark Tank*, *Dancing with the Stars*, and *The Bachelor*. While the couple's old Hungarian selves censored their pleasure in popular genres, they had no trouble enjoying a range of popular television programs as Americanized immigrants within the less hierarchical taste culture of the United States. This split consciousness was so naturalized that they were utterly unaware of it—a paradigmatic example of the cultural conditioning of status conferred by television taste.

The experience echoed a familiar contradiction in the insistence of a number of postsocialist viewers that they did not watch television or even that no one watched television during socialism. This of course is squarely contradicted by viewer letters and by socialist television's well-documented struggle to meet viewer demand for popular programming, as I discuss throughout the chapters ahead. It is also undermined by the onslaught of postsocialist nostalgia for socialist popular programming, which I address in chapters 7, 8, and 10.

Surprise 3: Socialist TV's Transnational History

Broadcast television around the world has had an unparalleled capacity to gather the nation-family around the proverbial fireplace. Television under state socialism was no exception. There is no doubt that the only way to do justice to its history is by understanding the intimate cultural clues and affective bonds it wove among national citizens over time. At the same time, one of my missions here is to resist the power of the national to monopolize emerging histories, and to refuse to yield these entirely to the institutional influence of nation-states.²⁹ As I argued earlier, the momentum around studying television as a way to access real-life socialism is an opportunity to reconsider the Cold War as more than the binary struggle between the two superpowers and the nation-states in their satellite systems. Socialist elite cultures formed around literature, theater, and film have been almost exclusively wrapped up in the bipolar model and adopted its dominant nation-based worldview. This approach internalizes and confirms the assumptions of marginal nationalisms: intellectual leaders rightly speak for and unite the population in opposition to the oppressive political regime. Such a model leaves unrepresentable subnational and transnational affiliations that would disrupt this alignment. It also gravely distorts the histories of socialist television. It ignores the fact that television industries under Soviet influence developed in simultaneity and interaction with those in Western Europe and beyond. Sylwia Szostak shows that socialist TV has followed John Ellis's three-stage chronology, from the postwar era of scarcity through the 1960s-1970s era of availability to the era of plenty since the 1980s, only with a slight delay in the latest phase.³⁰ Charlotte Brunson's adaptation to European broadcast television of Raymond Williams's periodization from emergent through dominant to residual cultures also applies to television in the East.³¹

Television was first introduced in most countries of the region in the prewar period, in step with the United States and Western Europe. Small-scale state television broadcasting began in the interwar years.³² World War II and its aftermath, involving the political and economic restructuring of the Soviet sphere of influence, interrupted the development of television infrastructures. State broadcasting did not start up again until the 1950s. It began, for the most part, with sporadic broadcasts received by a few thousand subscribers in each country. Regional cooperation began almost immediately. The first program exchange, a 1957 Hungarian initiative named *Intervision*, included Czechoslovakia, Poland, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and Hungary.³³ In comparison, postwar British and French television continued prewar experiments and began limited service in 1945–1946. Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI) began service in 1952, Danish and Belgian broadcasting in 1953, Spain in 1956, Sweden and Portugal in 1957, Finland in 1958, Norway in 1960, Switzerland in 1958, Ireland in 1961, Gibraltar and Malta in 1962, and Greece in 1966.³⁴

Much like elsewhere in Europe, by the 1960s the proliferation of television sets in the home and the quality and quantity of programming transformed socialist television into a truly national form of entertainment. In Hungary, where regular broadcasting began in 1957, the number of programming hours a week jumped from twenty-two to forty between 1960 and 1965.³⁵ The Slovene broadcaster, Television Ljubljana, started transmitting its own television programming in 1958, with seven to eight hundred television sets in Slovenia and about four thousand in all of Yugoslavia, compared with 90 percent of all homes in the United States at the same time.³⁶ In Czechoslovakia, where the war also interrupted prewar experimental broadcasts, trial public broadcasts began in 1953. The rapid increase in television access in the 1960s played a central role in the liberalization of the country's political climate. This liberalization was arrested following the Prague Spring of 1968, which was brutally crushed by the Soviet Union.³⁷ Television Romania was established in 1956 and added a second channel in 1968. This was then suspended in 1985 due to dictator Ceaușescu's energy-saving program until after 1989.³⁸ In most countries, however, the mid-1960s saw the launch of a second channel and the extension of broadcast time to five, then six, and eventually seven days a week.

By the mid-1960s, all Soviet satellite governments faced a pressure to revise their ideological positions and programming policies to adjust to

the opportunities and challenges presented by the new home-based mass medium. The launch of communication satellites, beginning with *Sputnik 1* in 1957, the first Earth-orbiting artificial satellite and a key component of the Soviet space and communication strategy, increased the regimes' fear over their populations' access to Western programming. This challenge could only be minimized by rechanneling desires for capitalist lifestyles toward fostering national cohesion on the party leadership's terms. Socialist governments therefore revisited their import policy and began a strategic domestic production of scripted programming in the 1960s. Much like in Western Europe, the first postwar broadcasts produced in socialist Eastern Europe were of live theatrical and sports events, as well as news programming, feature films, and a range of educational cultural programming. As I discuss in chapters 2, 3, and 4, similar to Western European public broadcasting, television's shift to the center of public culture in the 1960s allowed socialist governments to expand and solidify their educational-propaganda directives by wrapping those in increasingly entertaining forms.

The ideological goals behind the new programming policy had to be carefully formulated lest they undermine a regionally coordinated vision of socialist utopia. Media and communication reforms in the 1960s therefore focused on television as the main institution for implanting socialist democratic values within entertainment. Television had to provide carefully selected information. It also had to shape citizens' tastes so they understand and value Eurocentric art and culture and resist what were widely perceived as the detrimental effects of television: reducing appreciation for cultural quality as well as general mental and physical laziness.³⁹

The greatest political risk involved in the expansion of television broadcasting was that, unlike feature films or print publications, broadcast signals could not be confined to state borders. Inhabitants of large regions in Yugoslavia, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Albania received either Austrian, Italian, or West German programming. Shared TV signals had the most profound effect in East Germany, where viewers—with the exception of the “Valley of the Clueless” near Dresden, where foreign signals did not reach—were able to view West German broadcasting in a shared language, often specially directed at East German viewers. But border-crossing signals literally disrupted communism even in the most isolated corners of the communist empire. In Enver Hoxha's Albania, while the communist elite retained the privilege to watch foreign broadcasts in the 1960s, the brief liberal period of the early 1970s removed restrictions on consuming foreign (Italian) TV. By 1973, the party leadership

realized that the pleasures of Italian programs enchanted Albanian populations rather than demonized capitalism, so they launched a campaign against foreign liberalism and installed signal jammers. However, much like everywhere else, these proved ineffective, especially in border areas where one did not need antennae to receive signals.⁴⁰

In a similar vein, TV-deprived Romanians took advantage of the overflow of terrestrial broadcast signals to watch more liberalized Hungarian, Bulgarian, and Yugoslav programming in the 1970s and 1980s.⁴¹ This was a means to escape the isolation and deprivation imposed by the Ceaușescu regime. Annemarie Sorescu-Marinkovic's ethnographic research, conducted in the Banat region (bordering Yugoslavia and Hungary), shows that it was not only the significant bilingual and trilingual populations who watched foreign TV. Romanian viewers went through the trouble of learning foreign languages just to access a slice of the outside world. Ironically, the nationalistic restriction on bodily mobility across borders motivated a TV-mediated flow of exchange that re-created, at least virtually, the multilingual, multiethnic culture of the region during the Habsburg Empire and before.⁴²

Romanian viewers' reactions to Yugoslav and Hungarian TV echo Anika Lepp and Mervi Pantti's interviews with Estonian viewers, who were fixated on Finnish programming in the 1970s and 1980s, after the Finnish broadcaster YLE built a new TV broadcast transmitter in Espoo, which brought Finnish TV to households in northern Estonia. Even though only two Finnish public broadcast channels existed during this period, these carried American and Western European series. This opportunity even created a weekend "TV tourism" from other parts of Estonia to the northern areas so fans could follow their favorite serials. Many people who lived in the north were also able to learn the Finnish language from TV, which immediately conferred cultural capital that could be converted into economic capital as trade with Finland expanded in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴³ Television thus facilitated cultural identification with Nordic Europe, re-establishing the Baltic region's older imperial ties with Scandinavia in a quest for independence from the Soviet Empire.

As I discuss in more detail in chapter 8, the commercials Eastern viewers watched on Western TV held a particular attraction and whipped up desire for greener consumer pastures. But state socialist televisions also had their own more or less developed commercial departments. Television advertising in the most liberal socialist economies was embedded in an extensive set of commercial activities. At the most liberal extreme,

Slovenian TV Ljubljana and Croatian TV Zagreb established an official cooperation with the Italian RAI in the early 1960s. This happened despite protests from communist party authorities, who were anxious about the influx of Western news programs and the consumerist values transmitted by fictional programming.⁴⁴ Significantly, such unprecedented openness toward Western-type entertainment was finally approved because it strengthened the national leadership's own strategy of championing Slovenian national autonomy against the encroachment of Yugoslavian federalism, which was pushed by the Yugoslav state broadcaster RTV.⁴⁵

Sabina Mihelj even speculates that, in some ways, the televisions of the member states of Yugoslavia, particularly of Slovenia, were more commercially oriented than some Western European public broadcasters.⁴⁶ Yugoslavia's relative ideological independence from the Warsaw Pact under Josip Broz Tito's leadership opened up greater financial independence for media elites in exchange for supplementing decreasing state revenue. As early as 1968, 20.8 percent of Slovenian Ljubljana TV's revenue came from advertising. While this represented the most market-oriented variant, supplementing state support with increasing commercial revenue was common practice among socialist broadcasters in the East. Hungarian TV and Radio established its joint marketing department in 1968 and engaged in extensive domestic and international marketing activities, including its participation in the European Group of Television Advertising (EGTA), as I discuss in chapter 8.

The interconnectedness of television systems across the Iron Curtain was not limited to simultaneous development but was also ensured by ongoing exchanges from the start.⁴⁷ As Jonathan Bignell and Andreas Fickers write in the introduction to their important edited collection *A European Television History*, international cooperations, while more densely woven among Western countries, also included the East. The cross-border nature of radio waves enabled the launch of international, nongovernmental broadcasting institutions such as the International Broadcasting Union (IBU, founded in 1925), the European Broadcasting Union (EBU, 1950), and the Organisation Internationale de Radiodiffusion et de Télévision (OIRT, 1946), which became the dedicated "eastern" network.⁴⁸

European cooperation was first necessitated by technical issues: before World War II, there were different technical standards for the number of lines and images per second as a way to protect the national industries of TV set makers.⁴⁹ The IBU was created to regulate international broadcasting but was broken up after the war due partly to the abuse of its technical

facilities by the German army and partly to competition with the OIRT, which was founded by Soviet proposition. The EBU was established in reaction to the OIRT in an effort led by the BBC to form a union for Western European broadcasters. The EBU initially consisted of twenty-three broadcasters but soon expanded to include some Mediterranean and Middle Eastern companies. The OIRT and the EBU finally merged in 1993 under the goal of developing a shared European consciousness.⁵⁰

While the Cold War did split the continent's television industries into two networks, the channels between these remained open to traffic, which was facilitated by television diplomacy conducted by executives and creatives alike. Finland, balanced between Eastern and Western interests, was a member of both the EBU and the OIRT.⁵¹ After Finland (1965), Mongolia joined the OIRT in 1972, Cuba in 1979, and Afghanistan and Vietnam in 1982. Collaboration between the two networks became increasingly active as the Cold War thawed: the first discussion of exchanges happened in 1956; the first Eurovision-Intervision transmission, of the Rome Olympics, in 1960.⁵² Program exchanges were particularly extensive in children's television, where Eastern European broadcasters made a very significant although rarely acknowledged contribution.⁵³ The program exchanges ensured that most of Europe was watching many of the same programs, often simultaneously. The dual system of broadcasting was adopted in most EBU countries by the 1980s. This was not even the case for all capitalist countries. Greece allowed private television to exist only in 1989, the year the Cold War officially ended.⁵⁴

A shared socialist ethos of public service broadcasting (PSB) permeated these exchanges, based on a common European ethical and ideological ground that reaches back to the pre-Cold War era. The main features, successes, and difficulties of PSB have been a common denominator across all of these television cultures: the government-led mission to inform and educate while promoting nationalism, which has always been challenged by the imperative to entertain,⁵⁵ as well as the nationalistic cultural hierarchy that assigned low value to television.⁵⁶

As Bignell and Fickers explain, the identity of TV was defined already in the 1930s and crystallized around what was to become a shared European public broadcasting mission at the broadcasting technology exhibits of the 1937 World's Fair in Paris. A clear difference emerged in how American and European televisions marked out their future ethos, however. In the European version, spearheaded by German discourse, nation and education already appeared as key terms, in clear distinction from commercialization

and entertainment, which characterized U.S. discourses around television.⁵⁷ As Bignell and Fickers sum up, “The dominance of the public service concept of broadcasting in the European context and the commercial patterns in the US shaped hegemonic narrations of television on each side of the Atlantic. The World’s Fairs in Paris and New York both created and represented alternative symbolic frameworks in which television as a revolutionary technology and a new mass medium was presented. They were two windows giving a slightly different view of the new electronic ‘window on the world.’”⁵⁸

Bignell and Fickers offer a valuable model and methodology to write European TV history comparatively, transnationally, and collaboratively. Yet, even they treat the other Europe as a mere addition, confirming its status as the Cold War mystery land out of sync with European history. Their otherwise very thorough introduction includes only a few paragraphs about Eastern Europe, which reiterate blanket assumptions about the region: TV and other media institutions were closely controlled by Soviet-influenced governments until 1989; regional program exchange remained within and restricted to the COMECON bloc; and the function of television was to publicize decisions made by the ruling party, to educate the population, and to establish a channel of communication between the party and the people.⁵⁹ The editors do include a disclaimer for reducing Europe to Western Europe, pointing to the scarcity of TV historians in Eastern Europe. Indeed, of the twenty-nine contributing authors, only two are from and write about the former East.⁶⁰

It is important to ask why the trend continues to reaffirm the essential Cold War difference between East and West. Why is it that even in otherwise progressive and pioneering projects such as *A European Television History*, in which the editors consciously set out to think about European TV transnationally, one comes across statements like this: “In most Western European countries, television developed into a medium for the propagation of consumption, leisure and individualism; in the Eastern countries, it became a medium for the political socialization of the individual and the subtle implementation of ideology and political values.”⁶¹ As I show in the following chapters, one could safely switch East and West and the statement would be just as true. There is no evidence to support such a polarized distinction.

Not only did television under socialism generally operate in a liberalized fashion, with little or no censorship—apart from extreme cases and periods of dictatorship, as in Ceaușescu’s Romania—tight state control

and censorship also characterized periods of Western European broadcasting. As Bignell and Fickers themselves argue, the Nazi government in Germany was interested in the propaganda value of television, partly to compete with large U.S. corporations. The 1936 Berlin Olympics were a stimulus to the development of German TV, with viewing rooms established in cities to hold audiences as large as four hundred.⁶² Television was formed under military dictatorship in Greece in 1967, and the second channel remained under direct army control until 1982. Throughout this period, the government censored all programs, particularly news. Key TV personnel were selected based on their ideological conformity. Even the French government monitored and censored TV programs from the 1950s onward. Under Charles de Gaulle, this was direct political control, impacting every type of program, which also provoked direct resistance during the 1968 strikes, when some TV staff resigned rather than agreeing to submit scripts ahead of time.⁶³

Using television as an instrument of positive propaganda also united eastern and western broadcasters around educational initiatives—first to promote literacy in rural regions and then to educate the population about a wide range of subjects, as I discuss in chapter 2. Most often, propaganda took very subtle forms in the East, not unlike it did in the West. In the chapters on socialist and postsocialist domestic drama serials (chapters 9 and 10), I explain that, by the 1970s, dramatic programming was recognized as a much more hospitable and effective place for affirming the regimes' cultural and political directives than the news and other factual programming, which were hardly taken seriously by the public. The last two chapters (chapters 11 and 12) show that even humor and comedy, which were ostensibly charged with antiregime criticism, can be seen as a strategically tolerated expression that co-opted both artists and audiences and served the parties' interests.

The Future of Socialist TV Studies

Thankfully, work on socialist TV histories is no longer in short supply. In fact, those of us researching socialism and television now face the opposite problem: there is too much new material to process and incorporate for any single project. This is a delightful problem to have. Instead of gate-keeping and competition, it has given rise to some highly productive collaborations, which unapologetically crisscross Eastern and Western Europe, North America, and other postsocialist locations in an expanding

network dedicated to mapping the global history of socialist TV.⁶⁴ The emerging work on the history of socialist TV has been effectively removing the Cold War lens that has occluded alternative histories of European television. Instead of a clear-cut East-West divide, we see various local and regional patterns defined by cultural and political-economic similarities and differences. A much more important difference emerges between what Bourdon et al. call the “courteous” European model that reigned through the 1980s and the “competitive” Americanized model that challenged European broadcasters to shift to a dual broadcasting mode in a commercial, multichannel, deregulated global environment.⁶⁵ In this alternative historical view, Eastern European broadcasters were simply a little slower to join the competitive model than Western European ones. But competition always underscored their operation, as I explain in chapter 4. During nominal state monopoly, states always had to compete for eyeballs distracted by foreign broadcasts and, from the late 1980s, against satellite programming. In addition, state broadcasters were compelled continually to increase the volume of imports to fill schedules on state channels.⁶⁶

As I emphasize in every chapter that follows, no technical innovation, program, or policy can be isolated from its regional, European, and global context. While national histories do need to be written and remain crucial resources, I focus attention on patterns that stretch across national borders and defy common assumptions about the story and the potential of both socialism and television. This work can only be accomplished collectively. In researching this book, I have relied heavily on the labor of others who have browsed national archives, discovered and commented on old programs, and theorized about socialism and television. The conclusion that jumps out from virtually all this recent work is that the story of blind adherence to ideological dogma has been a Cold War construction from the beginning. Through the window that television opens, we see more or less desperate, often belated attempts at top-down control, constantly tempered by other, often openly unspeakable imperatives that these societies absorbed and negotiated, such as the actual needs of viewers to be entertained, educated, and invited to consume, the role of competition as a sustaining force in socialism, and experiments with various realist aesthetics in an effort to construct and convey authenticity.

But this book is not simply about correcting the record. The suggestion is that the history of existing socialism should not be thrown out with the tepid bathwater left over from the Cold War. Socialism is a globally shared

legacy. If we forfeit this story to Cold War stereotypes, we also enable the naturalization of neoliberalism as an economic logic that does not have alternatives. Since the inevitability of this logic tends to be justified in cultural forms, these alternative histories are especially important to revisit, particularly in a crisis-ridden Europe, which has been rearranging itself into a new “Cold War” between the core and periphery of the Eurozone, between “surplus” nations and the perpetually debt-ridden ones. The hybrid formations that socialist TV reveals are worth revisiting because, as Daphne Berdahl argues, socialism continues to have an active social life within postsocialism. Postrevolutionary societies, she suggests, make visible cracks and contradictions within neoliberal capitalism, especially if one “eavesdrops on the anxieties” to be heard in such places. I argue that socialist and postsocialist television magnifies these cracks and anxieties. Berdahl expands on anthropologist Katherine Verdery’s idea that postsocialism’s emerging forms should be assessed within the international context of global capital flows. Berdahl adds “that it also works the other way around: Postsocialism’s ‘emerging forms’ provide a means of assessing and critiquing global capitalism.”⁶⁷

Conceptual Organization

Rather than geographical coverage or chronological ordering, the logic of broadly conceived genres is crossed with the guiding force of key concepts. Like TV genres, these concepts connect the two world systems in surprising ways and offer additional platforms for comparison and historical revision: *competition, consumption, emotion, realism, history, memory, nostalgia, gender and (post)feminism, education, entertainment, humor, and satire* were not only compatible with socialism; viewed through the grids of television, they are also able to unhinge and modify our view of socialism. While these notions travel through the chapters, there are also dedicated points where I unwrap their specific historical and theoretical significance in relation to the generic forms discussed.

PART I: GENRES OF REALISM AND REALITY

This bulkiest part is dedicated to examining program types that prioritize *realism* as a representational tool to advance the ideological tenets of socialism in an *educational* fashion, modeled after the European public service broadcasting agenda. It includes an introductory chapter and four

others that discuss four different “realistic” program types, all of which developed and functioned in a European and global circulation: straight-forward educational programs, public affairs and documentary shows, crime appeal programs, and quiz/game shows. The progression through the chapters is from the most to the least ideologically strict genres, from the tightest centralized control to the most audience involvement.

PART II: GENRES OF HISTORY

The three chapters in part II examine socialist and postsocialist television’s intricate relationship to *history*, *memory*, and *nostalgia*. In chapter 6, this relationship is extracted from the historical drama and adventure series, a staple of the 1950s and 1960s. Chapter 7 explores the postsocialist explosion of nostalgia around television, while chapter 8 takes on the nostalgia around late socialist commercials in particular to shed light on the contradictory temporal relationship between socialism and postsocialism.

PART III: GENRES OF FICTION

These two chapters unfold the connections among *gender*, *consumerism*, and television. These connections are most explicit in dramatic programming, which had come to occupy increasing airtime by the 1970s. Chapter 9 surveys how women were positioned and positioned themselves as television professionals and viewers, particularly in relation to programs that specifically addressed them. Chapter 10 discusses how late socialist soap operas interpellated women to be superwomen who can do it all with no reward other than pride. The chapter tracks several of these serials through to their postsocialist remakes and reruns to show how they facilitated the spread of normative *postfeminist* ideas.

PART IV: GENRES OF HUMOR

The final two chapters bring to the forefront socialist and postsocialist manifestations of television comedy, particularly satirical political humor. The chapters show that, far from being the grim, allegorical cultural landscape associated with Eastern European art films, television incorporated and cultivated presocialist cabaret, a comic form of performance that developed in fairly specific ways in the region. Cabaret perpetuated not only political humor but also bourgeois entertainment within the socialist mass medium. In the last chapter I explore the analogy between the performative, self-justifying forms and ironic sensibilities of late socialist TV satire and contemporary, late capitalist comedy news.

Disclaimer

This book was not easy to write. My scholarly focus was hijacked over and over again by the affective charge of revisiting Hungarian television from the 1970s and 1980s, which was part and parcel of my upbringing. This emotional recall was different from my relationship to the TV of the 1950s and 1960s, which I inherited, and that of the 1990s and 2000s, which I followed from a distance for the most part. The power of nostalgia took me by surprise. At every turn, I was drawn powerfully to videos posted online by former viewers like myself, which led to other irresistible clips and made me laugh, cry, and, yes, sing out loud. Newspaper articles from the 1970s and 1980s automatically triggered a complex memory of specific programs viscerally embedded in their contexts of watching, the centralized rhythm of the socialist family's dysfunctional life in a tiny apartment, the Russian barracks opposite the standardized yet comforting architecture of the housing complex, the single school and grocery store where the neighborhood converged, and other enfolding environments, which were all linked by the fiber of these programs. It was strange to sift through a random database of digitalized traces of this old world, intimately close but registering with me as if they were someone else's memories in a different life, sandwiched among kitten videos and prefaced by commercials for things strikingly contemporary and American.

The power of nostalgia permeates this book, and without it, the book would be different. It would not be less authentic; but *TV Socialism* bears the mark of having been written by someone who carries the bittersweet burden of the memory of really existing socialism in her very cells. I have decided not to exile the trace of nostalgia into some kind of private realm, since I want to conjure up socialist TV in its effects, interactions, and continued life in people's memories. I do not want to cover up the visceral experience with academic jargon and theory. After all, there is a good reason why, paradoxically, there is so much nostalgia attached to television as the most authentic resource on socialism. Because viewer surveys and official party assessments are not only tucked away in archives but were also doctored to feed the undying spirit of socialist optimism, more "authentic" memories of socialism are paradoxically preserved in the shared *emotions* evoked by socialist TV. This emotional recall opens up a less quantifiable but all the more precious window into the surprising pleasures and contradictions of socialism.