

Sonja de Leeuw; Dana Mustata; Veronika Pehe

Editorial

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EDITORIAL

This special issue of *VIEW* aims to shine a light on television satire in Eastern Europe during the period of state socialism and beyond. Satire has been studied as a vehicle for challenging political and religious power as well as established norms and values. Even more so, satire is powerful in challenging established (state) ideologies, values, beliefs, and conduct. Yet in the state socialist countries of the former Eastern Bloc, satire - including television satire - was also employed by the state apparatus to target ideological opponents. This issue looks into the complex and often subtle and contradictory ways in which satire has disputed the relations between television, audiences and power in this specific geopolitical region of Europe.

Satire is often discussed in terms of 'biting', 'attacking', 'hurting', 'offending', 'blaming', and the like. In that sense, language hurts and images can hurt too. Satire challenges or attacks established religious, political and sexual values as well as different instances of power such as the state, the monarchy or God.

In this issue, we do not define satire in a limitative sense. Rather we see satire as a dynamic comic mode of performance that plays with, attacks and ridicules political and social conventions.¹ When it critically interferes with political discourses by attacking the state or those in positions of power, satire engages in forms of *political disruption*. In more lightweight forms, satire plays with social conventions, it mocks social behaviour and everyday social interactions and engages in forms of *social disruption*.

As the contributions in this issue show, satire can also be read as a historical record that documents the mentality of a society in a certain period of time, a mentality that is rendered visible by the ways in which satire challenges established ideologies, values, beliefs and conduct. Television satire serves as a political tool used to negotiate power and the norms and values in a society instilled by those in positions of power. To this end, satire uses various comic modes of performance, among which parody attacking formal aesthetic and stylistic conventions. These different forms and modes of satire are tied to the cultural traditions and specific political and historical context of the region's authoritarian past.

Various forms of television satire started to develop in the English-speaking world already in the 1960s, with pioneering programmes such as the BBC's *That Was the Week That Was* (1962–1963) that lampooned contemporary politicians and institutions, but also critically approached prevailing social phenomena such as racism. The situation in communist-ruled Eastern Europe was different. State television in socialist countries did encourage certain forms of satire, but these were targeted at perceived external enemies or remnants of capitalist behaviours deemed unacceptable in socialist societies. With censorship in place, satire that would openly criticise communist ideology or specific politicians was unacceptable. And yet, such satirical forms of critique did take place, as the opening audiovisual essay in this issue illustrates. Television producers found various creative ways to get satirical messages across with allegorical allusions and wordplay, or through a focus on the disillusionment of daily life in socialist societies, which indirectly pointed to the failures of the political regimes in power. Even though satire appears to have been an important form of cultural expression under dictatorship, few scholarly studies have been devoted to this phenomenon in the Eastern European region. For this reason, this issue is composed not only of scholarly articles, but also of curated archival footage.

We chose to start this issue with an interactive audiovisual essay that puts the spotlight on satirical archival material from five Eastern European countries: Albania, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovenia. The aim was to bring the *VIEW* readership as close as possible to the local contexts and cultures of television satire in Eastern Europe. We started from the premise that television satire in the region can only be understood outside its contexts of origin if accessed through the lens of local archivists' practices of selection, curation and contextualization. We made the primary archival material as well as the archivists' explanatory notes about the material *the* starting point for any further critical reflections on television satire in the region.

In the interactive audiovisual essay, we have integrated different *speaking positions* to make the cultures of television satire in the former socialist Eastern Europe accessible to our readership. Firstly, there is the speaking position of the archival material which has served as our primary corpus of sources and which viewers can watch by themselves. Here the archival material speaks for itself and lends itself to new interpretations with every new viewing experience. The archivists' selection and curation practices as well as their commentary on the selected material construes another speaking position within the interactive story. This is a speaking position that brings with it expertise on the local production, reception, archiving and preservation practices and which helps remedy and restore some of the 'lost' original contexts of the online digitised material that is made available to our international readership. We have also included extensive written editorial reflections in our interactive story, building upon our analysis of the curated archival material. In these reflections we engage with questions such as: how did television satire that ridiculed the absurdities of the communist regimes function within the repressive societies of the former socialist Eastern Europe and how can we understand television satire in the region as a transnational televisual space characterised by forms of humour, language and leitmotifs that emerged in response to the very specific social, political and cultural conditions in the region? In these editorial reflections, we also show how the political force of television satire in socialist societies relied on modes of address that recognized and validated the private subjectivities of ordinary people under circumstances in which those subjectivities were severed from public life. The editorial reflections in the interactive story offer a speaking position that is analytical and which situates television satire critically within a historical transnational context.

Last, but not least, the ultimate speaking position within this interactive story will be the position that the viewer chooses to take. The story is constructed as a non-linear, interactive narrative where viewers are expected to carve out their own navigation paths and decide at every moment where they want to go next, how much time they want to spend with different elements in the story, and which parts they want to revisit. We believe the archival material and the narratives integrated in our interactive story will lend themselves to new discoveries and new insights on the part of our readers and that the final insights about the television satire that is taking centre stage in our story will belong to the readers. Through the primary sources available in our curated archival collections, the commentary offered by the local archivists and our editorial reflections, we hope our interactive story will find new paths of discovery among our readers.

The collection of articles in this special issue approaches television satire in the former Eastern Bloc as a historical phenomenon that can only be understood in close relation to the socialist past. While television satire became unrestricted after the collapse of communist regimes and the removal of censorship, established modes of satirical expression carried through to the postsocialist era.

In the Exploratory section, Veronika Pehe's article focuses on television satire as a 'transitional format' in the Czech Republic and Poland. Focusing on the news parody and variety-style shows *Česká soda* ('Czech Soda Water') and *Za chwilę dalszy ciąg programu* ('Next Episode in a Moment'), Pehe demonstrates how satire allowed audiences to laugh away some of the anxieties associated with the transitional historical moment of the 1990s. Distinguishing between 'formal parody' of the aesthetics of political life and 'substantive parody' of everyday social practice in a rapidly

transforming society, the article explores the highly particular formats these shows forged and offers thoughts on how today, they serve as sites of memory of the 1990s.

Satire of the everyday experience of transition as a time of economic and social instability is also the subject of exploration for Slaveya Minkova's contribution on the Bulgarian show *Ulitsata* ('The Street'), 1992–1996. Minkova shows how the transitional moment of increased freedom of expression amidst a decreased capacity for domestic television production generated creative DIY aesthetics that satirised not only social phenomena, but also pushed the boundaries of television as a medium. Yet, as the article argues, while satirising societal issues in a provocative and liberating manner, the show also constructed a majoritarian identity at the expense of others who were racialized.

Teresa Pian traces the historical legacies of socialist-era television satire in Hungary in contemporary internet meme production, pointing to a trans-historical and globalised continuity in satire and political communication. The article argues that contemporary memes on the Hungarian internet use similar frames of communication to socialist television satire in order to challenge political power and norms. Socialist television satire targeted the failures of the socialist system. Similarly, as Pian shows, memes have the potential to register the failures of current regimes. But significantly, the article also reflects on the ability of satire to catalyse change. Satire challenges prevailing orthodoxies, but at times may also reinforce them. Just as the crumbling late socialist systems to a certain extent encouraged political humour as a proof of their purported openness, memes too can become a tool in reproducing hegemonic ideologies.

In the Discovery section, Maria Stover and Elza Ibroscheva's article explores the Bulgarian news parody show *Gospodari na Efira*. While the show started out as a local adaption of an Italian news parody format and bears resemblances to other news parody formats around the world, the authors emphasise how the long-standing success of *Gospodari na Efira* can only be understood when situated within the local histories of humour and joke telling under communism, and the specific post-socialist cultural, political and economic conditions in the country. The article illustrates the trajectory of the show within the post-socialist society and uses that as a platform to question and reflect on the changes in the Bulgarian post-communist media environment. Just like Teresa Pian's article, Maria Stover's and Elza Ibroscheva's article points to understandings of humour, satire and parody as barometers of (dis)continuities in post-socialist societies.

Jeffery Brassard's article explores satire's possibilities and limits in contemporary Russian television programming. Focusing on the central question of whether satire is possible in contemporary Russia, the author argues that in an environment without explicit censorship, yet where access to television infrastructure is contingent on political conformity with Vladimir Putin's regime, satire hardly ever criticises the highest echelons of power in Russia. Focusing on unscripted comedy and scripted sitcoms covering both political and social satire, Brassard shows that Russian television satire functions predominantly as a tool of cynical distancing for audiences, whereby they sublimate the difficulties and frustrations of life under authoritarianism through laughter.

In this issue, we invite you to explore television satire in Eastern Europe across different countries, time periods, forms and formats. Our focus on television satire in this specific geopolitical region of Europe comes with the implication that local histories and cultural politics in the region resurfaced modes of satire that were specific to the realities of the former socialist Eastern Europe. Television satire in this special issue is approached as a transnational televisual space engineered through the shared political and cultural histories of the region. This is a transnational televisual space rooted within the legacies of the socialist past. In its present forms, it can only be understood across the spectrum of continuities and discontinuities with the former regimes of repression.

Affinities with local cultures, politics and histories are key for dissecting television satire in Eastern Europe in ways that emphasise its political force and nature. This perhaps explains why this special issue has a limited collection of articles and why it is enriched with a curated audiovisual essay that tries to show satire in its original languages and situates it within its local, original contexts of broadcasting.

We wish you an inspiring reading and viewing journey through our special collection!

Sonja de Leeuw, Dana Mustata, Veronika Pehe

Note

1. See Monika Meijer Drees & Sonia de Leeuw, eds., *The Power of Satire* (Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing, 2018).