

# WHAT TO DO WITH A PERCEIVED DEAD-END? *THE STREET* (1992-1996) & AESTHETICS OF POSTSOCIALIST TV SATIRE

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**Abstract:** Taking as its main case study the experimental, satirical sketch show *The Street / Улицата* (1992-1996), this essay examines the transformational moment in Bulgarian broadcast media following 1989, specifically focusing on the period between 1990 and 1997, and ways in which the socio-political transition functioned as a catalyst for re-assessing the aesthetics, politics, and structure of television in the country. I focus on the juxtaposition of radical potential and problematic representations featured on this show, establishing connections between the post-1989 influx of Western cultural import and the new media form *The Street* took upon its release in 1992. The paper locates regional intersections of approach and aesthetics evident in postsocialist TV satire.

**Keywords:** television, satire, postsocialism, Bulgaria, aesthetics, experimental TV, issues of representation



Figure 0. The introductory title card to *Улицата/The Street* – an example of the experimental visual aesthetic present in the show (*The Street*, BNT 1995).

## 1 Introduction

This essay examines the transformational moment in Bulgarian broadcast media following 1989, and ways in which the socio-political transition functioned as a catalyst for reconstructing the landscape of the formerly nationalized television industry. Focusing on the satirical TV show *The Street / Улицата* (1992-1996), this paper will extrapolate ways in which television satire thrived within the seemingly contradictory context of an increased freedom of expression amidst a decreased capability for domestic production. While contradictory, these conditions can perhaps be read as generative in their incitement of participatory and DIY aesthetics in television. Given that *The Street* was one of the first and most experimental TV shows to be produced following the political transition, of particular interest are its discursive and aesthetic approaches toward the complexities of life in the country following this transformation.

As a nighttime sketch comedy directed by and primarily featuring stage actors<sup>1</sup>, the show often employed improvisation, parody, and overall humor delivered by theatrics. All of the actors (as well as director) being in their late twenties to early thirties in '92, and recent graduates of the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts in the capital Sofia, they embodied a type of defiance of the canon of both socialist and neoliberal television – something forefront and center in every episode. Largely influenced by a robust theater tradition in Bulgaria, many of their performances derive from stage improvisation, stand-up comedy, and pantomime, completely obliterating any expectation for a customary TV programme. The show plays with silliness bordering on acknowledged absurdity and surrealism, sexually explicit content, controversial topics, and frequent criticism of the current state of affairs. Experimentation with early DIY digital effects reminiscent of video art serves as the trademark for the show, poking fun not only at the viewer but at itself as well, leading every aspect of the satirical production to comment on the overall economic and social permutations of the decade.

*The Street* spoofed TV tropes and self-reflexively satirized the everyday experience (and struggle) of the population in a time of economic and social instability in Bulgaria. Experimenting with the newfound freedom to criticize the state and the status quo, and present a darker, more challenging side of Bulgarian life, the makers often approached societal issues in a provocative, and at times shocking and problematic, manner. They examined the mundane alongside the major shifts occurring at the time, and addressed issues relevant to the general public – the notorious driving of public busses, the difficulties of raising children in an economic crisis, the widespread issues of alcoholism, domestic violence, neighborly tensions in public housing, out-of-this-world levels of bureaucracy, excitement and skepticism about access to Western culture, and more – in the process illustrating the strange middle-ground newly occupied by the medium of television. Drawing from the compelling work on postsocialist<sup>2</sup> television by scholars such as Aniko Imre<sup>3</sup>, Dorota Ostrowska<sup>4</sup>, and Dana Mustata<sup>5</sup>, I aim to amplify the complexity of the satirical mode of mediated address in the context of social and political transformation, and illuminate regional intersections of approach and aesthetics evident in this genre.

## 2 Considering Media Flows and Cross-Border Aesthetics: Interaction Between Scarcity and Excess

The early 1990s marked a tremendous increase in the West-to-East flow of media, bringing a disproportionate amount of sitcoms, soap operas, and reality shows from Western Europe and the U.S. to the living rooms of Eastern Europe. This phenomenon unquestionably played a part in the development of the emerging independent television production in the region. The unidirectional flow of media<sup>6</sup> arguably served to hinder some aspects of domestic production for the greater part of the decade, however I hold that, if considered through a more complex lens, this trend can also point us in the direction of unexpected and quite telling intersections in the newfound aesthetics of the medium. My approach here will not follow a finger-pointing logic, instead aiming to situate all of this within a larger conversation about how media globalization may function differently in distinct postsocialist societies with respect to television

production. I will seek possible dis/continuities between the socialist and postsocialist periods, in terms of the particular ways humor and social critique are employed in *The Street*, and will also discuss the intersections in themes and aesthetics between Eastern European postsocialist TV satire and its Western counterparts. Here it is also significant to note that socialist and postsocialist TV across the region was and is not a singular notion, and we must in fact speak of postsocialisms in the plural. I have found a comparative regional approach generative, however, in illuminating intersections as well as differences in the transformational moment for formerly socialist mediascapes that was the 1990s.

If we consider media systems as a kind of mirror of the power structures at play in a given society, examining the foundations of these structures would be key in understanding the socio-political environment. While analyzing Bulgarian television production following the political transition in 1989, there appear several significant influences. To quote Divya McMillan, “The technological and economic advantage of industrialized core countries and their status as former imperial powers also mean they are leaders in global media”<sup>7</sup>. Even so, there are complexities exceeding the capitalist/non-capitalist binary often brought up in global media discourses. My aim here is not to lament international influence on Bulgarian television production, but to closely examine the conditions under which this production functioned during the transitional/transformational period. As McMillan notes, “Globalization does not automatically mean an undermining of the sovereignty of nation-states, nor a homogenization of Third World cultures as a response to the presence of global media products in their markets.”<sup>8</sup>. The conversation to be had here stems from two inadequacies of each side of the media globalization argument – on the one hand, to contend that globalization alone acts to erase cultural media autonomy, is dismissive of said culture and the greater intricacies of media industries as well as audiences; on the other hand, to completely ignore some of the more harmful and intrusive qualities of globalization and capitalist venture in regard to domestic media production, is equally remiss. The answer lies somewhere in the muddy middle. Peripheral media industries are more multifaceted than often presented.

In her piece “Television in the Age of (Post-)Communism”, Dana Mustata has presented what I find to be a generative approach to the interplay of politics and aesthetics within Romanian television of the “post-” era<sup>9</sup>. She proposes a re-examination of television history, arguing for greater specificity in television scholarship about the medium itself, in order to extrapolate the role of politics in various developmental moments in the country’s television industry. Her use of the notion of “television scarcity” is especially relevant to the arguments in this paper. She writes:

“While all other European broadcasters were at the peak of the availability era in the early 1990s, Romanian television was coming out of a national regime that had derailed its course from an era of availability to an era of imposed scarcity.”<sup>10</sup>

This idea of “imposed scarcity”<sup>11</sup> is one of cross-regional and transnational significance when it comes to Eastern European (post)socialist television-scapes. Arguably, *The Street* responds to just such an “imposed scarcity” phenomenon, occupying the vacuum produced in 1992 by the transformation of Bulgaria’s formerly communist television structures.

## 2.1 Contextualizing *The Street* in 1990s Bulgaria

*The Street* provides a fascinating case study, as it was one of the first shows of its (experimental) kind in transitional Bulgaria. It features a unique TV sketch comedy model, and an experimental, theatrically inspired, video art aesthetic – at times reminiscent of British sketch comedies such as *Monty Python* or the approachable aesthetics of American public access television, and perhaps stemming from a similar drive for a democratization of media. The youthful enthusiasm of its creators, as well as their dark humor so characteristic of the 1990s, are unmistakable – Krustyo Lafazanov, Maya Novoselska, and Hristo Gurbov, among others, became legends of Bulgarian performance, in some part as a result of their roles on this show, while the writer and director, Stefan (Tedi) Moskov, received wide

acclaim for the series domestically, and went on to win the Press Prize at the Rose d'Or Festival for Entertainment Broadcasting and Programming in the city of Montreux in 1996<sup>12</sup>.

Constantly described as a 'cult' show<sup>13</sup> in colloquial discourse, *The Street* has largely remained in the public's consciousness as one of the most legendary Bulgarian TV shows, both for its fans, as well as critics. When speaking with friends or family members, many born before 1995 will recall a favorite skit or episode. Some lines from the show have become widely used sayings, or catch phrases, and the popularity of the show has even reached younger generations through the proliferation of clips on platforms like YouTube. A repeated experience recounted in my informal conversations about the series, was its ability to make the spectator both laugh and cry at the profound absurdities reflected from Bulgarian reality at the time. *The Street* was such a novel phenomenon, such an early marker of postsocialist television, that to this day it occupies an interesting high ground in public opinion.

Despite this cult status, the series is, with few exceptions, largely absent from academic discourses and histories of Bulgarian television. Scholarship on *The Street* is more often relegated to the discipline of theater (rather than television) studies in the Bulgarian academe, and it is virtually absent from international histories of television. This is a surprising omission, given that this specific show largely coincided with the re-structuring of Bulgarian National Television (BNT) and the advent of Efir 2, which became the newly conceived version of Channel two (also known as programme two) of BNT<sup>14</sup>. Efir 2 was created in June of 1992 and *The Street* first aired on July 30<sup>th</sup> of the same year. Bulgarian television scholar Polyva Ivanova characterizes this period in the history of BNT as one in which, "the entire range of topics, the entire palette of problems that exists in society is freely addressed."<sup>15</sup> The first iteration of the show also ended in 1996, a year and a half before the announcement of the cessation of Efir 2 and the creation of the first private television channel in Bulgaria in 2000. *The Street* was later picked up once more on Channel one of BNT in 1999, however my analysis remains focused on the initial run of the show, as I believe it more clearly reflects the transformations taking place in Bulgarian television at the time.

*The Street* also needs to be contextualized within a larger emergent sketch comedy wave in the midst of the transitional/transformational moment of the early 1990s. Shows such as *Ku Ku*<sup>16</sup>, *Kanalet*<sup>17</sup>, and *Klub NLO/Club UFO*<sup>18</sup> featured a similar satirical approach, characterized by sketch performances parodying some of the more absurd or difficult social, cultural, and economic moments of the decade. All three of these examples also feature skits that very much reflect the meeting of Western cultural import with a peculiar postsocialist reality. *The Street*, however, stands out due to its avant-garde approach in both visual aesthetics as well as surrealist-inspired performative experiments. While *Klub NLO/Club UFO*, as one example, featured well-known actors from Bulgarian cinema with established star personas, and was perhaps more approachable at the time as a result, *The Street* was able to achieve cult status in many ways because it was conceived as an experiment and produced by a generation of artists just emerging onto the national stage. It is important to also note that the type of humor characteristic of the show was not necessarily new – self-referential or self-satirizing humor is well established in Bulgarian literary traditions, with classic works such as those of Aleko Konstantinov<sup>19</sup> and Elin Pelin<sup>20</sup> serving as prime examples, and it is also visible in Bulgarian visual arts, with the cartoons and animations of Donyo Donev<sup>21</sup>, among others, also exemplifying this kind of satire. The use of video aesthetics in *The Street* however, presents an entirely new realm of exploration of this satirical tradition and offers a renewed (or emergent) aesthetic connected to the perceived role of television in the advent of postsocialism.

Describing the show in a more recent televised interview, Moskov stated:

"Back then, for the first time, in a strange way which wasn't familiar, some things were said. Those were the first sips of freedom." [translation mine]<sup>22</sup>

Moskov even directed a stage revival of the series in 2015, and later a screen remake, called *Intersection*. This TV iteration of the show, however, did not follow the success of the original, perhaps due to changing expectations of humor, structure, and aesthetics in television programming, or maybe due to the fact that large sections of the younger generations no longer relate to this kind of comedy about the transition – we have entered a different time now, requiring a different approach to what it means to be postsocialist.

*The Street* in some ways became the outlet for public struggles and frustrations – things not permitted for broadcast on Bulgarian television before '89. In her work on Bulgarian Television history, Polyva Ivanova references *The Street* as composed of “short sketches, which bring ‘street jargon’ to the TV screen”<sup>23</sup>. This, she writes, leads to:

“a peculiar kind of ‘unleashing’ of societal reactions through the recreation of plots stemming from the Bulgarian day-to-day life. Self-irony [in this context] is the main approach for the application of satire and humor.” [translation mine]<sup>24</sup>

Ivanova goes on to detail the unique quality of a show like *The Street*, and the novel genre to which it belonged due to the particular kind of “visual” freedom within which it functioned. She notes that before the changes brought on by the transition, this format was practically absent from the screen.

Mirroring the above-mentioned freedom, many of the female characters on the show delivered by Maya Novoselska<sup>25</sup> unapologetically address sexist tropes in Bulgarian media. She frequently ridicules the patriarchal expectation of a woman on television to function as a sexual object, and subverts the male gaze by portraying a range of female characters not adhering to the accepted norms of Bulgarian “womanhood”. Two incredibly successful approaches Novoselska utilizes consist of her aim at male revulsion in the powerful sexuality she embodies, and her caricature of the ‘naïve woman’ trope. In addition, she often portrays characters, who transcend gender, successfully solidifying the caliber of her performance. In many instances, Novoselska’s performances are recounted as some of the most memorable in conversations with fans of the show.

Frequently mixing documentary and found footage alongside improvisational performances and DIY visual experimentation, the creators of the show point to the discursive potential of new media aesthetics (such as video art) in the transformational moment for Bulgarian television that was the 1990s. A particular segment featuring actual footage of student-led protests accompanied by Snap’s “I’ve Got The Power” relates especially well to a point made by Dorota Ostrowska, regarding the Polish comedy series *Alternatywy 4*, in which she establishes a “relationship between *Alternatywy 4* and an avant-garde student-led current”<sup>26</sup>. Ostrowska further connects the series to the Polish counter-culture movement Pomaranczowa Alternatywa, writing:

“Both identified their origins in the theater of the absurd but also in that of provocation by opening reality into a sphere of imagination, play and subversion – thus creating a new cultural and aesthetic sphere – socialist surrealism.”<sup>27</sup>



Figure 1. A skit in which Maya Novoselska parodies expectations of femininity by describing her “appearance” to a male caller. She reflexively addresses the camera multiple times, and implicates the viewer in this process of imagining and subverting ideas of “womanhood”. (*The Street*, BNT 1995).



Figure 2. One (of many) characters portrayed by Maya Novoselska on *The Street*, featuring a musical performance (*The Street*, BNT 1994).

In fact, Novoselska herself has commented on the surreal nature of *The Street*, and the connection to the radical potential of the absurd is made evident by the themes and aesthetics explored in the show.

## 2.2 Reacting to Transforming Programming Practices

The vacuum caused by the political and social shifts in the early 1990s, in addition to the devastating economic collapse, coupled with the newly open media borders in Eastern Europe, prompted a quick and determined bid for airtime from both Western Europe and the U.S. Alison Harcourt speaks of the rush for Eastern European airwaves, detailing the prevalence of international policy experts in Central and Eastern European capital cities<sup>28</sup> - the hunt was on. And while a Western European television model was adopted, pressure from the U.S. caused a de facto model reversal, Harcourt notes, “in practice, a more liberal<sup>29</sup> market model similar to that of the U.S. is in place in Central and Eastern Europe today.”<sup>30</sup> To put some of these changes into perspective, while the first exchange/collaboration with U.S. media was negotiated in 1987<sup>31</sup>, as soon as 1996 *E.R.* had already reached the peak as the most popular show on TV in Bulgaria<sup>32</sup>, and by 2005 non-national broadcasting entities accounted for 67.4% of the total airtime<sup>33</sup>. In the span of less than twenty years, the media landscape of the country and region had transformed more than in the previous half a century.

When considering the historical and industrial context presented, *The Street* can be treated as a television phenomenon illustrative of Bulgaria’s budding contact with Western media influence in the decade of the 1990s. Self-reflexivity was a staple of the show. Constant, honest commentary about the process of producing the show, in terms of funding, filming, and performing, often reflected the tensions within (and state of) society overall. A well-known recurring sketch called “Half Stories” mirrors the much ridiculed “halfway” status of the political transition. Phrases such as “We’re in a transition, we’re halfway there /.../ Half-pay, half-time, half-life/.../ I can’t say what I want, so I say only half” illuminate the Bulgarian condition in the 1990s<sup>34</sup>. Not only do the narrative themes explored by the show embody this kind of commentary, but the visual elements similarly mirror the issues the show examines. In the “Half Stories” skit, the characters are literally cut in half, a prime example of the DIY video art aesthetic discussed. In another example, Maya Novoselska is “crushed” by an animated foot containing the word for “life”, as she says “In the next episode you will see some crushed by life people, who are dreaming of something brighter and better”<sup>35</sup>. This interplay between thematics and imagery here amplify the absurdity, but also acknowledge the relevance of “halfway-ness” and crushed expectations to the condition within which Bulgarians found themselves at the time.



Figure 3. “Half Stories” – a pun referring to the feeling of “halfway-ness” following the transition (*The Street*, BNT 1995).



Figure 4. A skit titled “Crushed by Life People” – the foot contains the Bulgarian word for “life” (*The Street*, BNT 1995).

*The Street* in conjunction with American television on the Bulgarian small screen presented a unique perspective of the Eastern European media landscape in the 1990s. As stated previously, the show can be read as a text responding directly to the newly opened borders. Discussing similar television dynamics in post-1989 Poland, Sylwia Szostak states, “In Poland, the influx of foreign [American] cultural imports has had an impact on the domestic conditions of scheduling, leading to the development of new practices”<sup>36</sup>. She goes on to detail the way some Polish shows transformed to mirror American productions in aesthetic presentation as well as narrative convention<sup>37</sup>.

While this is similarly the case for plenty of 1990s and contemporary Bulgarian television series, *The Street* serves as a fascinating counter-example to this industrial trend. As ‘Dallasification’<sup>38</sup> was taking hold of prime-time television, *The Street* ruled nighttime programming as well as daytime conversation among the public. The show *Dallas* became a synonym for the “soap opera” genre and its proliferation on Bulgarian television, and it was exactly Efir 2 of BNT which first began airing this kind of programming<sup>39</sup>. It is then no surprise that *The Street* directly referenced the public’s



Figure 5. A sketch parodying the experience of watching primetime soaps (*The Street*, BNT 1995).



Figure 6. A re-enactment of an imagined telenovela with a subtitle/intertitle “Operas” (*The Street*, BNT 1995).

fascination with this genre of television in numerous skits<sup>40</sup>. A window into the nascent stages of media globalization in Bulgaria, *The Street* took on the role of challenging the past, the present, and the future – a hefty task. In “New Media Landscape in Bulgaria”, Maria Bakardjieva describes the significance of television during the transition, writing:

“Along with the facts, the electronic media offered definitions and interpretations of the new and sometimes difficult to understand social reality.”<sup>41</sup>

To this extent, the show in question functioned not only as entertainment, but as a constructed social space of mutual definition.

*The Street*’s skits and performances portrayed a self-reflexive and satirical take on the intersection of Bulgarian culture with new access to global cultural imports - at times imbued with skepticism, other times yet revealing curiosity.



Figure 7. Surreal/Absurd – Lafazanov re-enacts a noir character speaking gibberish English, with subtitles first spelling out the imagined words in Bulgarian, then revealing “He doesn’t speak English” (*The Street*, BNT 1995).

The show can almost be read as a record of the process of cultural exchange, or more accurately, cultural familiarization. There are numerous sketches parodying American shows and tropes, but also ones communicating an excitement about American culture, and music especially. Performing choreographed dances to Snap’s “I’ve Got The Power”<sup>42</sup> with spectator grannies on the street, reenacting scenes from real or imagined American films (e.g. *Arizona Dream*<sup>43</sup>, and *Taxi Driver*), and speaking fake/gibberish English<sup>44</sup> as a comment about the emerging issues around translatability, are among the more memorable examples of reactions to the increased access to American culture specifically.

### 3 The Need to Address Mediated Representations of Difference in the Context of Postsocialist Eastern Europe

The above-mentioned intersection of Bulgarian culture with new access to global cultural imports is also where some of the key problematics of the show become most apparent, as their handling of cultural and ethnic representation is at times ill informed, and, in some cases, jarring. Considering these representations in the context of postsocialism, in addition to the larger regional histories of film and television during socialism, is important to understanding the root of some of these problematics. The show features several instances of brown and blackface in skits portraying characters based on ideas about Romani or black American identities, which cannot and should not be ignored, with some sketches seemingly celebrating elements of black American culture such as jazz (unquestionably in an extremely ill-advised manner), while others engage with characterizations of Roma identity historically constructed as the “other” to majoritarian Bulgarian society<sup>45</sup>. Ksenija Vidmar-Horvat has specifically stated that it is crucial to scrutinize both explicit and non-explicit iterations of racism in the context of Slovenian postsocialist television, writing, “non-explicit racism, or ‘inferential racism’ as Stuart Hall calls it, especially demands our critical attention”<sup>46</sup>, given its public acceptance and function as “the politically acceptable terrain on which the dominant ethnic community of Slovenes is being constructed.”<sup>47</sup> While Slovenia and Bulgaria’s histories and cultures differ from one another, Vidmar-Horvat’s notion can be translated to the Bulgarian context as well, and is especially relevant to a show like *The Street*, which emerged in the first years following a discordant socio-political transition requiring of the population a re-aligning/re-structuring of identity and cultural belonging. Aniko Imre has repeatedly asserted that Eastern Europe might be one of the last places where whiteness remains unquestioned, and where the category is still seen as

morally transparent<sup>48</sup>. Imre examines the complex conditions which have allowed for this to remain the case, and elaborates on two important notes – 1) that Eastern European nations often claim an exception to Europe’s history of imperialism as reasoning for a supposed innocence to racism; and 2) that the unquestioned notion of whiteness is paradoxically both the cost to European cultural belonging, as well as a reason for Eastern Europe’s exclusion from this “true” European identity. She writes:

“a cultural admission into Europe is conditioned on an ongoing compulsion to prove one’s right to belong by overidentifying with the host culture and outperforming its whiteness – at the expense of racialized others.”<sup>49</sup>

Reminiscent of Richard Dyer’s notion of “whiteness as a coalition”, which features boundaries and internal hierarchies<sup>50</sup>, Imre’s point gestures toward the fundamental obligation of scholars of postsocialism to address race and question the role of hegemonic whiteness in our respective cultural contexts. Speaking of the lack of discussion of race and racial formations within the broader field of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian studies, Sunnie Rucker-Chang and Chelsea West Ohueri state:

“while eastern Europe (broadly defined) is often assumed to occupy a place of racelessness, the region is shaped by global racialized processes that in turn produce varying forms of inequality, differences, and marginalization within the region.”<sup>51</sup>

Here, I find that the toolkit of media studies engages a generative approach to postsocialisms in the region in ways, which enlist not just “high” theory and “high” art, but also media which speaks to a greater number of people. Thus, as scholars of Eastern European postsocialist media, we must be especially attentive to the ways television in the region reflects issues dealing with race, nationalism, and cultural belonging.

To return to *The Street*, in some ways even more telling than the original instances of this type of representation in the show, is a 2017 Nova TV interview with Maya Novoselska and Tedi Moskov, in which, out of Novoselska’s many performances in the series, the producers of the interview chose to foreground an image of her in this problematic portrayal to contextualize her introduction, specifically using it as a way of encompassing the range of her performances overall<sup>52</sup>. This points to a very particular shift in Bulgarian television in the last decade, characterized by a comfort with and even endorsement of these kinds of representations<sup>53</sup>, and is indicative of an uncritical and unquestioning reliance on practices of mediated racialization. For reasons such as these, I argue that conversations about race and racism in the history of Bulgarian television are not only timely, but in truth belated. Other regional examples, such as the Croatian version of Dutch/Spanish show *Your Face Sounds Familiar*, which Catherine Baker has examined in a recent contribution to VIEW journal<sup>54</sup>, reveal that this is in fact a troubling cross-regional phenomenon. Baker points out the timeliness and importance, as well as some of the key challenges, of contextualizing the use of blackface within Eastern European media, writing:

“The Croatian edition, like other central/south-east European editions using blackface, thus raises what is currently the most pressing question in critical studies of race in postsocialist Europe – how far can analytical concepts created in societies where colonialism and the enslavement of Africans left direct legacies be applied in countries which were ‘not colonised’ or ‘did not have empires,’ where those legacies are more diffuse?”<sup>55</sup>

Contemporary work on the subject of race in Central and South East European media, such as that of Imre, Rucker-Chang, Ohueri, and Baker, points to the urgent need to address issues of representation, reckon with histories of racism in the region, and consider approaches which both illuminate and disentangle the complexity and historical/geo-political entanglements present. With this in mind, the role of television satire in the further construction of imagined racialized others is one essential to examine from a critical perspective, in order to work towards unclinking and restraining contemporary racisms and ethno-nationalist sentiments in the region. In a 2006 interview, Moskov himself gestured towards his disdain for rising far-right and ethno-nationalist movements in Bulgaria, jokingly saying that if he produced his version of the history of Bulgaria he may be persecuted by far-right leaders as it would feature more irony rather than national pride<sup>56</sup>. This sentiment can be seen as a kind of reflection of the resistance to status-

quo emblematic of his work in the original series, introducing further complexities in the discussion of ways racial and cultural formations function within both media and politics in the Bulgarian context.

## 4 Conclusion

What this essay aims to examine is the moment in Bulgarian broadcast media immediately following 1989, and the ways in which the socio-political transition functioned as a catalyst for transforming the landscape of the formerly nationalized television industry. As *The Street* was one of the first TV shows to be produced following the political transition, and one which not only coincided with but also reflected the restructuring of BNT, it offers a unique view of tensions, contradictions, inadequacies, and a determination to make sense of the nonsensical, with its discursive and aesthetic approach toward the complexities of life in the country in the midst of an unprecedented transformation. As an experimental, nighttime episodic comedy, self-reflexively satirizing the everyday experience (and struggle) of the general population in a time of economic and social instability, *The Street* functioned as a challenge and intervention to the formerly nationalized Bulgarian television, as well as to television as a medium overall. Experimenting with the newfound freedom to criticize the state and present a darker, more challenging side of Bulgarian life, the show approached societal issues in a provocative and liberating manner, while at times also falling into the familiar and unfortunate traps of constructing a majoritarian identity at the expense of racialized others. There is difficulty in writing about a media text with so much radical potential, one which for so many came to define the decade of the 90s in Bulgaria, but also one which exhibits such considerable flaws. I have chosen to do so, however, because I believe this kind of conversation is of critical importance to a greater understanding of postsocialist TV satire, of the history of the “post-“, as well as to a belated and necessary reckoning with the persistent issues of representation in Bulgarian popular television.

## Notes

1. The show was directed by Tedi Moscov, featuring Maya Novoselska, Krustyo Lafazanov, Hristo Gurbov, Kamen Donev, and Toncho Tokmakchiev, among others.
2. Before delving further in the paper, I should clarify my choice of non-hyphenated “postsocialism”. I propose a reconsideration of the notion of postsocialist (sans -) as a concept understood to denote not solely a temporal identification (as in post-1989 transitions), but also a complex condition, which transcends regional locatedness. My intention relating to this term is for it to transgress a simple identification with “formerly Eastern bloc” and instead move toward a shared transnational mode of addressing and engaging with the world.
3. Aniko Imre, “The Witty Seven: Late Socialist-Capitalist Satire in Hungary” in *News Parody and Political Satire Across the Globe*, eds. Geoffrey Baym and Jeffrey Jones (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2013), 130–143.
4. Dorota Ostrowska, “The Carnival of the Absurd: Stanislaw Bareja’s *Alternatywy 4* and Polish Television in the 1980s” in *Popular Television in Eastern Europe during and since Socialism*, eds. Timothy Havens, Aniko Imre, and Katalin Lustyik (New York and Abingdon, Routledge, 2013): 65–80.
5. Dana Mustata, “Television in the Age of (Post-)Communism: The Case of Romania”. in *Popular Television in Eastern Europe during and since Socialism*, eds. Timothy Havens, Aniko Imre, and Katalin Lustyik (New York and Abingdon, Routledge, 2013): 47–64.
6. Timothy Havens, Evelyn Bottando, and Matthew S. Thatcher, “Intra-European Media Imperialism: Hungarian Program Imports and the Television Without Frontiers Directive”, in *Popular Television in Eastern Europe during and since Socialism*, eds. Timothy Havens, Aniko Imre, and Katalin Lustyik (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2013): 123–140.
7. Divya C. McMillin, *International Media Studies*. (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 67.
8. Ibid.
9. Mustata, “Television in the Age of (Post-)Communism”.
10. Ibid, 60.
11. Mustata defines “the era of scarcity” as featuring “limited television channels, partial broadcasting time, discontinuous television schedules, and an emergent penetration of television into domestic private spaces and daily routines”, basing this definition on John Ellis’ book *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*.

12. SRF. "The Rose D'Or Festival: Award Winners 1961-2008." SRF - Swiss Radio and Television Corporation. Switzerland. (*The Street* was one of 2 Bulgarian TV shows to ever receive a prize at this festival).
13. Example, Nova TV interview "The Big Names Are Speaking: Maya Novoselska and Tedi Moskov in Conversation with Ani Tsoleva."
14. See Poly Ivanova, *Втора Програма – Ефир 2 на БНТ (1975-2000)* [Second Programme - Efir 2 of Bulgarian National Television (1975-2000)], (Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University, 2006).
15. Ibid 99.
16. *Ku Ku* premiered January 27<sup>th</sup> 1990 on BNT and aired until October of 1994. It was a college student-run show attempting to reflect the socio-political climate through satirical interviews and sketches.
17. *Kanalet* began airing in 1995 on Channel 1 of BNT as the successor to *Ku Ku*.
18. *Klub NLO/Club UFO* aired on Channel 1 of BNT from 1996 to 2004. Famously, it featured stars of Bulgarian cinema such as Georgy Mamalev, Velko Kunev, Anton Radichev, and more. It was a humoristic sketch show.
19. Some well-known works of Aleko Konstantinov are *До Чикаго и Назад* [To Chicago and Back] (1893) and *Бай Ганьо* [Baj Ganyo] (1895).
20. Elin Pelin (b. 1877) is famous for his satirical take on Bulgarian village life. He was prolific, with many works in poetry and prose.
21. Donyo Donev's *Тримата Глупаци* [The Three Fools] was a popular series of short animations on Bulgarian television in the period between 1970 and 1990.
22. Moskov interviewed by Ani Tsoleva. "The Big Names Are Speaking: Maya Novoselska and Tedi Moskov in Conversation with Ani Tsoleva." Hello Bulgaria, Nova TV, 1 Jan. 2017. <https://nova.bg/accents/view/2016/12/26/169076/>.
23. Ivanova, *Втора Програма* [Second Programme].
24. Ibid, 104.
25. See figures 1 and 2 [Note: all stills sourced from publicly available online archives of Bulgarian National Television; subtitles in English provided by author].
26. Ostrowska, "The Carnival of the Absurd," 66.
27. Ibid, 74.
28. Alison Harcourt, "Transnational Media Regulation in Central and Eastern Europe" in *Central and Eastern European Media in Comparative Perspective Politics, Economy and Culture*, eds. John Downey and Sabina Mihelj Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2017), 137.
29. 'liberal' U.S. model = less public policy involved; vs. 'social responsibility' European model; both terms dealing with amount of restrictions/regulations.
30. Harcourt, "Transnational Media Regulation," 137.
31. A very limited collaboration between CNN and Bulgarian National TV leading to 3min broadcasts of mutual programming. See: Poly Ivanova, *Bulgarian Television 1959-1990: A Historical Anthology on Bulgarian Television*. (St Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia, 2007), 319.
32. Vaclav Štětka, "Back to the Local? Transnational Media Flows and Audience Consumption Patterns in Central and Eastern Europe". *Central and Eastern European Media in Comparative Perspective Politics, Economy and Culture*, eds. John Downey and Sabina Mihelj Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2017)165.
33. Zrinjka Peruško and Helena Popovič, "Media Concentration Trends in Central and Eastern Europe" in *Finding the Right Place on the Map: Central and Eastern European Media Change in a Global Perspective*, eds. Karol Jakubowicz and Miklós Sükösd (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2008): 176.
34. See figures 3 and 4 [Note: all stills sourced from publicly available online archives of Bulgarian National Television; subtitles in English provided by author].
35. See figure 4.
36. Sylwia Szostak, "Post-Transitional Continuity and Change: Polish Broadcasting Flow and American TV Series" in *Popular Television in Eastern Europe during and since Socialism*, eds. Timothy Havens, Aniko Imre, and Katalin Lustyik (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).
37. Ibid, 160.
38. Štětka, 165; 'Dallasification' refers to a particular kind of Americanization of Central and East European programming, derived from the title (and popularity) of the show *Dallas*.
39. Once again, Poly Ivanova describes the advent of the "soap opera" genre in BNT, writing, "Due to the absence of this genre from television programming until that moment, audience interest in it in the beginning of the 90s was so immense that television experts from Efir 2 used *Dallas* in order to compete with Channel 1 in the prime programming hour of 8pm." [translation mine]; See Ivanova, *Bulgarian Television 1959-1990*, 115.
40. See figures 5 and 6 [Note: all images sourced from publicly available online archives of Bulgarian National Television; subtitles in English provided by author].
41. Maria Bakardjieva, "The New Media Landscape in Bulgaria". *Canadian Journal of Communication*. Vol. 20, no.1 (1995): 1–6.
42. Snap was actually a German band, but "I've Got The Power" was performed by American rapper Turbo B. and American singer Penny Ford.

43. Incorporating elements reminiscent of *Arizona Dream*, a film directed by renowned Eastern European filmmaker Emir Kusturica and produced in the United States, further comments on the transnational collaboration/exchange taking place.
44. See figure 7 [Note: all stills sourced from publicly available online archives of Bulgarian National Television; subtitles in English provided by author].
45. Note, I have intentionally not included stills of these instances, as I do not wish to perpetuate this imagery.
46. Ksenija Vidmar-Horvat, "Racing for the Audience: National Identity, Public TV and the Roma in Post-Socialist Slovenia". *Popular Television in Eastern Europe during and since Socialism*. in *Popular Television in Eastern Europe during and since Socialism*, eds. Timothy Havens, Aniko Imre, and Katalin Lustyik (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).
47. *Ibid*, 259.
48. See Aniko Imre, "Whiteness in Post-Socialist Eastern Europe" in *Postcolonial Whiteness: a critical reader on race and empire*, ed. Alfred J. Lopez (Albany: State University of NY Press, 2005).; Aniko Imre, "Postcolonial Media Studies in Postsocialist Europe," *Boundary 2: an International Journal of Literature and Culture*, vol. 41, no. 1 (2014).
49. Imre. "Postcolonial Media Studies in Postsocialist Europe," 131.
50. Richard Dyer, *White*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1997): 51.
51. Sunnie Rucker-Chang and Chelsi West Ohueri, "A Moment of Reckoning: Transcending Bias, Engaging Race and Racial Formations in Slavic and East European Studies". *Slavic Review* 80, no. 2 (2021): 216.
52. Ani Tsolova, "The Big Names Are Speaking: Maya Novoselska and Tedi Moskov in Conversation with Ani Tsolova." Hello Bulgaria, Nova TV, 1 Jan. 2017. <https://nova.bg/accents/view/2016/12/26/169076/>.
53. One need only look at contemporary examples of satire and standup on Bulgarian TV to find more examples of problematic representations of marginalized groups such as the Roma. *Комуцуме* (or *The Comics*, 2007-present) is but one example of a show consistently relying on this kind of racist humor.
54. Catherine Baker, "Your Race Sounds Familiar?: Blackface, Cross-racial/cross-gender Drag and the *your Face Sounds Familiar* Franchise (2013–) on Post-yugoslav Television". *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture* 10, no 20 (2021): 83–103.
55. *Ibid*.
56. Tedi Moskov interviewed by Christina Patrashkova „БНТ иска ‚Улицата‘, аз се офлянквам“. *24 Часа/24hrs*, February 16, 2006, 17.

## Biography

Slaveya Minkova is a Phd candidate in Cinema and Media Studies at University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). Her current research examines the complexities of postsocialist aesthetics within an emergent mode of media production associated with globalized film industries in South East Europe. Her dissertation project takes the space of the film studio as one of its main objects of study, considering the relationship between studio and city, the geopolitics of international/ transnational sets, and the material conditions of digital media labor in the region.