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POKING FUN AT THE TRANSFORMATION

POSTSOCIALIST TV SATIRE IN THE 1990S

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Abstract: This article examines postsocialist TV satire of the 1990s in the Czech Republic and Poland using the examples of the programmes *Česká soda* (Czech Soda Water, ČT, 1993-1997) and *Za chwilę dalszy ciąg programu* (Next Episode in a Moment, TVP, 1988-1994). These pioneering shows were among the first to introduce the format of television satire and news parody to postsocialist screens. The article explores how the programmes' creators forged a highly particular format stemming from local variety show traditions. It analyses the ways in which these shows articulated criticism of the transformations of postsocialist countries from planned to market economies and reflects on their enduring popularity and function as sites of memory of the 1990s.

Keywords: TV satire, news parody, postsocialism, economic transformation, *Za chwilę dalszy ciąg programu*, *Česká soda*, Polish television, Czech television

1 Introduction

The collapse of communist rule in Eastern European countries between 1989 and 1991 brought a marked change in television programming. The double changing paradigm of marketisation and lifting of censorship brought not only an influx of foreign production, it also led to the development of new, autochthonous programming formats. One such format was television satire. Satirical shows were not absent from socialist TV screens, especially during late socialism. Yet the rather tame, officially sanctioned criticism, as well as covert political references that audiences looked for “between the lines” during socialist times, differed significantly from the open critique of political satire and news parody known primarily from the Anglophone world.

Postsocialist TV satire of the 1990s remains a largely underexplored topic, a striking absence for several reasons. Shows such as *Za chwilę dalszy ciąg programu* (Next Episode in a Moment, TVP, 1988-1994, hereafter *ZCDCP*) in Poland and *Česká soda* (Czech Soda Water, Czech Television, 1993-1997) in Czech Republic were highly popular and have achieved cult status, enjoying a second wave of popularity with the rise of the internet and platforms such as YouTube, where clips from the shows are widely circulated. Yet scholarly literature on these programmes is almost completely lacking.¹ Existing studies on comparable Romanian and Hungarian programmes show that postsocialist television satire can serve as an exploration of a specific episode of television history, where cultural producers,

having gained unprecedented artistic freedom, forged highly particular and at the time pioneering formats combining news parody, well-known from the Anglophone world, with local entertainment traditions. Writing about the Romanian news satire *Cronica Cărcotașilor* (The Tattlers' Tattle), broadcast since 2000, Alice Bardan observes that like in the case of American news satire programmes, the aim of the show is “to expose how media strive to divert people’s attention away from real political debate toward the performative dimension of political life.”² The two shows discussed in this article display similar aims, pointing to common characteristics of the news satire format East and West. Yet, as Anikó Imre argues in her discussion of the Hungarian satirical programme *Heti Hetes* (The Weekly Seven), postsocialist satirical formats also draw on longer traditions of satire entertainment of the socialist and even pre-socialist periods and can thus be seen as “a linchpin between late socialist and late capitalist forms of political satire.”³ Imre draws conceptually on the arguments of anthropologists Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak, who identify similarities and convergences between satirical formats in “late socialism” and “late liberalism”, suggesting that a late socialist form of satire known as *stíob*, which rests on overidentification with its subject of parody, anticipates late-night American news satire.⁴ The humour of *ZDCDP* and *Česká soda* also lends itself to interpretation along these lines.

Postsocialist television satire thus cannot be read as a simple post-89 “import” of Western formats. As scholars such as Sabina Mihejl, Dana Mustata and others have shown, postsocialist television displayed many continuities with its socialist predecessors, and was already embedded in a global network of cultural exchange, with Western programmes relatively well-represented in socialist TV programming.⁵ Especially in the case of *ZDCDP*, whose creators Wojciech Mann and Krzysztof Materna had worked in Polish television throughout the 1980s, there is a case for viewing the show’s “transitionality” in terms of a continuum of television history, rather than a decisive break. Although the creators of *Česká soda* made an effort to present their show as completely novel, as I will discuss, the programme, too, displayed continuities with longer local traditions of television satire and entertainment.

More broadly, I suggest that satirical shows of the 1990s serve as a point of access into the cultural history of the postsocialist transformations in general, revealing some of the popular myths associated with the introduction of the free market and liberal democracy. They also demonstrate some of the early mechanisms of the debunking of these myths. As the literature on the postsocialist transformations demonstrates, the early 1990s were a period of liberal consensus and largely neoliberal economic solutions, supported by much of the media at the time.⁶ Early critique was initially voiced through humour and the abovementioned satirical shows were one of its manifestations.

ZDCDP was a programme composed of short comedy sketches, authored by Wojciech Mann and Krzysztof Materna, aired on the second channel of Polish television (TVP2). Mann and Materna were at that point already an established comedy duo, having collaborated together on Polish radio and in a previous satirical television show in the 1980s entitled *Mądryj głowie...* (the title refers to the first words of a well-known Polish proverb equivalent to the English *a word is enough to the wise*), which built its humour mainly on linguistic satire. The first six instalments of *ZDCDP* were first screened in 1988, though none of them survive in the archive of Polish public television, nor are they available on the internet. Hosted by the programme’s writers, the show, with episodes of varying length usually around 30 minutes, featured parodies of game shows, talk shows, cooking shows, as well as short sequences in the convention of various serial genres (a Brazilian *telenovela*, an Italian mafia crime show, historical drama – all performed by Mann, Materna and their regular collaborators). TV parodies were accompanied by many comedy sketches, which commented in a satirical manner on various social and economic phenomena of the day, such as the rise of private enterprise, selling and buying various goods, the work of the secret police, television commercials, renting a flat, etc. *ZDCDP* thus started out as a show satirising the realities of still-socialist, but swiftly changing Poland.

Broadcast in sixteen irregularly scheduled 10 – 20 minute episodes on the second channel of Czech public television, *Česká soda* represented a more straightforward news parody, with initially two, and later only one anchor introducing a series of satirical news items that often edited together video clips of public figures with interventions of the anchor

to produce shocking and incongruous effects. Developed by Slovak documentary director Fero Fenič as a project of his private production company Febio, the show was created by a large community of cultural producers recruited from the milieus of satirical theatre drama, theatre of the absurd and satirical magazines. Each episode was the collaborative product of several writers and directors, though over time, the show came to be most strongly associated with the personality of actor Petr Čtvrtníček, who co-wrote and co-directed most episodes, played many of the characters and from the sixth episode also performed the role of the main news anchor.

Despite the similarities in topics, the shows employed different styles of comedy. Following the format of a news broadcast, *Česká soda* thrived on shock value, targeting specific public figures; the camp persona of the host Petr Čtvrtníček functioned effectively as an inversion of the staidness and seriousness of public television news broadcasting. In later instalments, the exaggerated performances in some of the news stories effectively parodied also the overly dramatic and tabloid style of the news on newly established private television channels. *ZCDCP*, on the other hand, engaged in less abrasive humour and rather than commenting on particular people and events, satirised universal situations and qualities, such as the arrogance of politicians. As a result, the programme has stood the test of time well and certain sketches continue to be circulated by internet users as relevant even in the present political situation.

As Igor Piotrowski writes in one of the few texts dedicated to *Za chwilę dalszy ciąg programu*, the programme is “a first-rate source of the history of the new Poland and as such can be watched in several ways”.⁷ Following Piotrowski’s suggestion of a multi-layered reading, this article has a three-fold aim. I outline how postsocialist TV satire can be understood as stemming from a longer history of domestic TV variety shows. I analyse the ways in which the shows’ creators formulated critiques of the postsocialist transformation of society. And finally, following from Anikó Imre’s insight that “television is a massive archaeological site for exploring the socialist period and its continued afterlife”,⁸ I also offer some thoughts on these programme’s “second lives” on the internet as a site of memory of the 1990s.

In order to do so, the article relies primarily on the analysis of selected episodes of the programmes themselves, as well as secondary sources, mainly interviews with the shows’ creators in the media and other press articles documenting the shows’ popularity and longevity. Questions relating to the reception of *Česká soda* were consulted in the Czech Television Archives; the Polish Television Archives unfortunately do not gather information on ratings or audience reactions and so the discussion of *ZCDCP* in this direction relies on media sources.

2 Satire in the Era of Transformation

In an environment where public television in the newly democratic postsocialist societies was still in the process of negotiating its mission, satire performed the important function of questioning some of the basic assumptions inherited from the previous era, when television performed the role of a key propaganda tool for communist governments. Writing about news parody, Geoffrey Baym and Jeffrey P. Jones argue that it questions the authority of news creators, “the built-in assumption that *they*, from positions of privilege, speak (down) to *us*, and that we, in turn, have little role in the process but as passive receivers of their truths.”⁹ This seems like a particularly significant form of appeal to early postsocialist audiences, when the ability of openly debunking authority was still a novelty.

Satire is a versatile format that can function as a tool of the prevailing ideology or, alternately, serve to unmask current ideological orthodoxies. As such, satire is not reserved to democratic societies, despite often being understood in the Western cultural world as a kind of safety valve that functions as a “critical means of confronting and deconstructing discourses of authority.”¹⁰ Indeed, satire maintained a presence on socialist TV screens, where it could perform a covertly critical function. More often though, it took an officially sanctioned form aimed at discrediting the authoritarian regime’s critics. In Czech literary and film criticism, the term “communal satire” has come to designate an officially

endorsed form that criticised social norms and everyday interactions, but never targeted those in positions of power.¹¹ Such satire was thus necessarily quite different to that developed principally in the UK and USA, where pioneering satirical programmes such as *That Was the Week that Was* (BBC, 1962-1963) openly criticised those in power and thematised controversial subjects.

On socialist television, this rather subdued form of satire was couched in variety show programmes that mixed satirical sketches with songs, dance, and other types of performance, becoming more openly provocative with the passage of time the more the guiding ideological principles of Marxism-Leninism lost their legitimacy, as Imre argues.¹² In her work on Hungarian postsocialist satire, Imre also notes that socialist TV entertainment forms drew on pre-War forms “derived from the tradition of stage cabaret and, when adapted to tv, continued to carry the generic label of ‘cabaret’ as a fairly specific socialist tv genre.”¹³ The scant literature on *ZCDCP* also places it within the tradition of cabaret, especially its two most popular examples in Poland – *Kabaret Starszych Panów* (The Cabaret of Older Gentlemen, 1958-1966) and *Kabaret Olgy Lipińskiej* (The Cabaret of Olga Lipińska, the general name for a series of shows of director and writer Olga Lipińska produced between the 1960s and the 2000s).¹⁴ These programmes retained a vaudeville aesthetic, integrating political satire within the boundaries of censorship in songs and sketches. While *ZCDCP*'s creators Wojciech Mann and Krzysztof Materna undoubtedly drew on these traditions, the pared-down, often amateurish aesthetic of the show differed visually from its lavish predecessors. In terms of Western influence, its absurdist brand of humour, as scholars and numerous news articles never fail to point out, was most reminiscent of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*.¹⁵

In the Czechoslovak context, “cabaret” was known as *estráda*, which was the term for musical variety entertainment used also in the Soviet Union. Its most popular Czech iteration was the long-running show *Televizní klub mladých* (1971-1998), attracting audiences primarily because of the comic sketches of its duo of hosts, Jiřina Bohdalová and Vladimír Dvořák. One of the writers of *Česká soda* mentioned *Televizní klub mladých* in a 2008 article as basically the only domestic show that could provide a source of inspiration,¹⁶ although as Soňa Oulová points out, a number of more critical variety shows did exist during state socialism, especially on Czechoslovak Television's second channel or as part of the special programming segment called the Youth Television Club (*Televizní klub mladých*), broadcast from 1973.¹⁷

Postsocialist TV satire thus presented a peculiar format that mixed both the old and the new. The changing social, political and economic realities acted as inspiration, though arguably also a hamper to this kind of work. Although different political forces vied for power, the general goal of creating a market economy and becoming part of the European political community was widely shared across the political spectrum in both Czech Republic and Poland. In light of this lack of conflict, it is not surprising that the writers of Czech and Polish satirical shows, as well as critics, have remarked that working in an authoritarian regime under conditions of censorship could paradoxically be easier. Cultural producers could capitalise on creating implicit tensions through jokes built on double entendre and refined allusions.¹⁸ “It is hard to produce satire if everything is allowed, including insulting public figures. The breeding ground for satire are prohibitions and restrictions,”¹⁹ one Czech critic summarised. Yet despite the helplessness satire writers may have felt at the sudden shock of being able to “say anything”, the rapidly transforming societies around them provided a wealth of material for parody. As Krzysztof Materna told an interviewer: “At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, even a taxi stand was a source of material for a thousand skits. You stood in line and the taxi driver decided whom he wanted to take where.”²⁰

The two programmes discussed here thus present transitional formats which gave their creators ample space for experimentation before television satire in both countries settled into forms that often drew direct inspiration from or were licenses of Western shows. These included the Czech *Gumáci* (Rubber Figures), a version of the British programme *Spitting Image*, broadcast on commercial channel Nova between 1994-1999, and the Polish equivalent *Polskie zoo* (Polish Zoo), which also featured puppets, but cast politicians and public personalities as zoo animals (broadcast on TVP1 between 1991-1994). Later satirical formats turned to political comedy talk shows in both countries²¹ or scripted fictional sitcoms satirizing the work of influential political lobbyists in the Czech Republic and the authoritarian functioning of the Law and Justice party in Poland.²²

3 Za chwilę dalszy ciąg programu: “Substantive Parody”

Although it is only the roundtable talks in the spring of 1989 that are generally deemed to mark the end of state socialism in Poland, the country’s economic transformation (and with it numerous social changes), began earlier. Already the 1988 “Wilczek law” liberalised the market significantly and was followed by an entrepreneurial boom. Changing everyday practices and habits and new phenomena enabled by the deregulation of the market – these were often topics that Mann and Materna chose to tackle when they first began broadcasting *ZCDCP* in 1988. In this sense, their work continued the tradition of communal satire, aiming mainly at day-to-day interactions. This was not because censorship or other kinds of pressures were stopping them from targeting those in positions of power, especially after the political changes of 1989, but rather because, as Materna explained, “we were never interested in purely current affairs, but in the essence of things. Our sketches were not parodies of people, but – as I call it, substantive parody”.²³ This meant jokes aimed at the essential qualities of particular groups rather than specific persons – an approach that enabled the show’s writers to create an enduring commentary on the ongoing social changes around them.

Their success rested on drawing on tested satirical strategies. Although audience statistics for the show are not available, the creators of the show revealed in a radio interview that it was only once they began broadcasting their new show *MdM* on TVP1 in 1994 that they found out that *ZCDCP* had constituted one of the most-watched programmes on TVP2.²⁴ One of the successful satirical modes in late socialist Poland, which Dorota Ostrowska analyses based on the example of the television series *Alternatywy 4* (Alternatives Street no. 4, dir. Stanisław Bareja, 1986-87), also drew on traditions of cabaret and *stiob*-like absurdist theatre, mocking the dysfunctionality of material conditions on a Warsaw housing estate, which translated into the dysfunctionality of interpersonal relations.²⁵ At the time, *Alternatywy 4* presented a daring critique of life in late socialist Poland. Mann and Materna made use of a similar tactic, scrutinizing material and social dysfunctions – but in the conditions of a rapidly politically and economically liberalizing society. Unlike Bareja, the target of their satire was not the authoritarian political power that produced these various dysfunctions, but rather the bumpy journey of Polish society in adapting to the conditions of democracy and the free market.

Mann and Materna were keen observers of the changing realities, satirising dodgy business practices in an environment where legislation often lagged behind the entrepreneurial spirit of Polish citizens. Thus, for instance, an episode²⁶ from early 1990 staged an interview with a fictional director of a company manufacturing television sets, who reveals his business strategy with deadpan sincerity, in an aesthetic mode reminiscent of *stiob* as described by Boyer and Yurchak. Asked by the reporter if he does not fear competition from foreign companies who produce cheaper and better TV sets, the director replies that the hike in import tariffs means that “importing foreign TV sets – as you have pointed out, better and cheaper ones – is not possible, so we have a monopoly on the market.” The director goes on to add that the low quality of his TV sets means that there is also a high demand for replacement parts, which he intends to start producing.

The humour of this sketch lies in the incongruity of the company director not trying to sell his product as “the best”, but openly admitting to its deficiency and describing the shortcomings of the transforming economy, which often created business practices unfavourable to ordinary consumers. At a time when most media were cheerleading the changes the economy and society was undergoing, satirical shows like *ZCDCP* mined jokes from a description of the dysfunctionality of everyday realities. Sketches such as *Porady dla bogatych* (Advice for the Rich, 1990) or *ABC dla przedsiębiorczych* (ABC for the Business-Minded, 1992) laughed at the new entrepreneurial zeal. They exposed the false promise of “catching up with the West”, one of the ideological tenets of the transformation.

Cultural theorist Magda Szczęśniak has shown how intellectuals at the time warned of “imitating and aping” the West – in fact revealing a deep-seated fear of the unoriginality and instability of the newly-established Polish middle class.²⁷ Szczęśniak effectively analyses how feelings of inadequacy were constantly implicit in the didactic aims of many pop culture products of the 1990s that sought to educate their audiences towards becoming model Western-style consumers. Analogously, Irena Reifová has discussed the shaming of the working class in



Video 1. *Za chwilę dalszy ciąg programu.* TVP. 26 January 1990. "Interview with the director of a company manufacturing television sets".

postsocialist reality TV, demonstrating that the object of shaming is often the perceived "excessive preservation of habits dating back to the period of socialism".²⁸ Such is certainly the case of the television manufacturer in the sketch above, who continues to possess the habitus of a director of a socialist enterprise, oblivious to marketing and profits.

Yet Mann and Materna do not engage in shaming in their satire. Szcześniak argues that one of the attributes of the Polish middle class of the transformation era was a negotiation of an appropriate visuality that would help to consolidate the identity of this new class. The unsuccessful imitations of Western standards that were a hallmark of the transformation era stemmed from a lack of cultural and social capital that would enable individuals to successfully inhabit the visual, or more widely, aesthetic attributes of the middle class.²⁹ This is precisely where the satire of *ZCDDP* is aimed. Typical is a sketch in which the director of a department store (played by Mann) commissions a television advertisement. Initially, Mann lacks the right words to describe the effects he imagines the advert should produce, using a number of interjections, such as "bang!", "boom!", before instructing the advertising executive that he should produce something "like they do in the US or somewhere". Starting from the shabby visuality of the director's humble office, Mann's unflattering hairstyle and the awkward placement of the characters on the scene, the sketch targets the comical attempts at imitation of Western visual standards, with the



Figure 1. The garish visuality of the resulting television advertisement commissioned by the department store director.

resulting advertisement shown as a chaotic jumble of colourful slogans running across the screen to the accompaniment of loud music. Clearly, neither the director nor the advertising executive have amassed the necessary knowledge and cultural capital to understand the “visual norms”, in Szcześniak’s terms, that produce a successful television advert.

In the early 1990s, Polish society was undergoing massive changes not only in people’s everyday behaviours, but also in terms of how everyday realities looked. The free market brought with it a deep aesthetic change – visible in the amount of advertising that flooded public space and of course also television screens, where loudly coloured commercials advertised a flurry of newly available products. Parodying commercials was thus a staple on *ZDCDP*. In a sketch from 1989, Mann and Materna advertise a car, standing in a car park in bleak winter weather. At the end, they step aside to reveal a naked woman sitting incongruously on the dilapidated vehicle. The sketch comments on the vulgarisation of the visual sphere through the sudden ubiquitous presence of gratuitous nudity, used to sell anything from cars to building products to domestic appliances, and visually satirizes the expectations of prosperity that the increasingly Westernized consumer culture was meant to deliver.³⁰

Indeed, much of *ZDCDP*’s humour was devoted to poking fun at a host of new, Western-inspired television formats. As Piotrowski writes, “no television genre survives the satirical gaze of *ZDCDP*”.³¹ Mann and Materna made fun of all the imperfections that plagued television broadcasting in the 1990s: incompetent presenters, failing technology, poorly-chosen contestants in game shows. The show playfully commented not only on the changing world around, but also the changing world of television.

Ultimately, the sketches of *ZDCDP* are not necessarily critical of Westernization as such, but rather the clumsy maladaptation to Western standards. They provided audiences a sense of relief from the pervasive postsocialist emotion of inadequacy by laughing at the vain efforts to “catch up” too quickly and humorously acknowledged the prevailing habits of the previous era without shame, but rather a tongue-in-cheek playfulness.



Video 2. Za chvíľę dalszy ciąg programu. TVP. 13 June 1986. "Car advertisement".

4 Česká soda: Formal Parody

In comparison, *Česká soda* tore onto Czech TV screens in 1993 with the subtitle "a national exam in democracy," giving away its provocative intentions to break all established taboos. The show's creators did not hide their lofty ambitions to bring something previously unseen to Czech TV screens.

First broadcast in 1993, the novelty of many of the social and economic changes taking place in the Czech Republic had already worn off. In contrast to *ZCDCP*, *Česká soda* did not comment on economic and social changes as they were happening, but rather attempted to satirize an already-established, yet still young and at times fumbling political order. The show worked with a more traditional political satire format, attempting to comment on current political events and often making fun of politicians by splicing footage of their actual statements for television with the nonsensical questions of *Česká soda*'s host, creating absurd dialogues in which politicians always appeared vulgar, dishonest or downright stupid. As film critic Kamil Fila remarks, the humour of *Česká soda* worked with "the possibility of belittling those who hold positions of power and should also have authority, but have lost it."³² The *jouissance* the show offered to audiences thus rested on the ability to disrupt not only communist, but also contemporary power and authority with impunity.

Despite its claims to novelty, *Česká soda* also melded the format of news parody, previously unseen on Czech screens, with established variety show traditions in the form of parodies of popular music videos and commercials. Its

presence on public, as opposed to private television (the first private television channel in Czech Republic only began broadcasting in 1994) was to an extent subversive, as its satire was also aimed at Czech Television's leadership and the institution as such.

The programme thus functioned as a kind of grudgingly sanctioned self-criticism within Czech Television's programme, allowing for public television's own ridicule. This was a function that officials at the time considered to be a proof of democracy. In the controversies surrounding the programme, the Czech Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting issued a statement in which it condemned certain sketches on the show, but noted that "similar programmes are common on the screens of traditionally democratic countries, where they contribute to political culture by unmasking false tones in political life."³³ The comments reveal how satire was understood even by significant institutional actors as a legitimate and necessary format in the nascent democracy.

The main controversies around the show were, however, not a result of its discreditation of public figures, but rather its jokes that deliberately pushed the boundaries of good taste. Homosexuals, the Roma, neighbouring Slovakia and Germany – all of these were the target of offensive gags. Similarly to *ZCDCP*, *Česká soda* also parodied the false promises of television commercials, whose aggressive tactics and vacuity did not go unmissed by the creators of *Česká soda*. A 1994 episode (*Česká soda IX*), for instance, targeted the exaggerated promises of the whitening properties of laundry detergents. A mother is shown to be bathing a dark-skinned child. A man enters and asks her: "How come your child is not clean and white?" and offers her the detergent "Árijec" (Aryan), a wordplay on the popular detergent "Ariel". The dark-skinned child is immediately replaced by a white child. Such racist humour, from today's point of view unacceptable, is seen by many today as emblematic of the unrestrained freedom of the 1990s, which knew no boundaries and political correctness – a form of memory I will discuss below.

The impudence of some of the jokes caused not only reviewers to largely criticise the show, but also audience members to write or phone in to Czech Television with angry reactions, as the Czech Television archives document.³⁴ One journalist wrote: "I am impatiently awaiting when (...) *Česká soda* will start featuring burping and farting."³⁵ Sure enough, several instalments later, the show included a montage of Czech Television's main political discussion programme, in which through clever editing, one of the participating politicians was made to look as if he had indeed broken wind (*Česká soda XVI*, 1997).

The show was considered so scandalous that the Czech Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting sent a letter to Czech Television's director, expressing concern that *Česká soda* had "overstepped the acceptable boundaries of cordiality and tact"³⁶ towards Germany and Slovakia, two countries that were often the target of jokes. While Slovak politicians were ridiculed for their excessive nationalism, the regular "German language course" *Alles Gute* (All the Best) that featured at the end of every episode, suggested Germans maintained enduring sympathies towards national socialism. Yet Czech Television actively capitalized on this scandalous reputation, attracting audiences on the promise of a divisive show. For instance, the live anchor who at the time announced every programme, introduced the fourth episode with the words:

For the fourth time you are being given the chance to watch a programme that has divided this nation into two numerous groups. One is laughing and clapping, the other is demanding an immediate excommunication of its creators.³⁷

In comparison to *ZCDCP*, *Česká soda*'s more circumscribed format as news parody did not comment on as wide a range of social phenomena. Its two main sources of humour were jokes ridiculing politicians and other public figures, and parodies of commercials. If *Materna* called *ZCDCP* "substantive parody", then *Česká soda* could be characterised as "formal parody" in that it aimed not so much at the content of the ridiculed subject matter, but rather its form. The numerous edited sketches based on political TV debates used montage not to mock the content of politicians' pronouncements, but rather the way they said them. The show's deft editing primarily emphasised laughable mannerisms, funny facial expressions, it exaggerated characteristic idiomatic expressions used by particular figures or made fun of speech impediments. One of the most memorable gags of this type featured Senator Václav Benda, famous for his pronounced use of the filler sound "erm" (*Čtvrtníček, Šteindler a Vávra heute* [Čtvrtníček, Šteindler and Vávra Today], 1998). The show's editors cut away all the actual words spoken by Benda in a television appearance, leaving only the filler sounds, which were then set to musical



Video 3. Česká soda IX. ČT. 10 June 1994. "Aryan".

accompaniment, making it appear as if Benda was “singing”. The gag was all the more amusing for being introduced with the jingle of *Zpívánky* (Singalong), a popular children’s programme. It is an illustrative example of the show’s “formal parody” – we learn nothing of Benda’s politics, it is only the aesthetics of his public presence that are the subject of ridicule.

Like *ZCDPC*, one strand of humour in *Česká soda* thus implied that the aesthetics of Czech politics did not achieve the desired (by implication Western) standards, subverting and ridiculing the form of political debate and the public appearances of politicians. Its other aim, akin to news parody programmes in both East and West, radically questioned the meaning-making ability of the news by focusing only on its performative and aesthetic dimension.

5 Satire’s Afterlives: Nostalgia, Memory and the Myth of the 1990s

Both shows continue to enjoy an internet circulation even years after the end of their broadcast. The use of internet sources and media mentions as evidence of the longevity of a particular programme is inherently problematic, as we do not have any sense of the representativeness of particular internet users’ reactions. I do not make a claim here to provide a comprehensive overview of the ongoing internet “afterlives” of the two programmes discussed here, but instead will focus on several media events, revelatory of their continued reception.



Video 4. Čtvrtníček, Šteindler a Vávra uvádějí. ČT. 25 September 1998. "Singalong with Václav Benda".

In both cases, the programmes, despite being so firmly embedded in the realities of the 1990s, are nowadays considered cult products of popular culture. As a 1998 press article noted about *Česká soda*, the show generated several unofficial fanclubs, the unauthorised use of the programme's name for a brand of soda water, and a high interest in VHS screenings of older episodes in cinemas. A 1998 feature-length film with a selection of the best sketches from the show attracted sizeable audiences to cinemas and today all episodes are widely available online.³⁸ Similarly, selections of *ZCDPC* episodes have been published on DVD compilations and the programme is enjoying a "second life" on the internet and numerous internet forums and social media groups are dedicated to the show.³⁹ The continued popularity of these shows can be read as part of a growing wave of pop culture nostalgia for the 1990s and reveals much about the popular memory of this decade in postsocialist countries.

The 1990s have generally been the object of nostalgia not only in postsocialist Europe, but also elsewhere in the Western world in recent years. Fashion trends from the 1990s are back and the internet and social media are full of 90s-themed pop culture quizzes. In the postsocialist world, this nostalgia is all the more specific for the rapid changes the decade brought. Despite the indisputable economic hardship experienced by certain sectors of society, the explosion of freedom that accompanied the transformation is now mythologised as a period when "anything was possible" in popular memory. Numerous publications, coffee table books, social media groups, podcasts and other media in both Czech Republic and Poland promote this memory of allegedly unrestrained freedom and are dedicated to exploring the popular culture, fashions and social phenomena of the decade.⁴⁰ The continued interest in *Česká soda* and *ZCDPC* can be understood as part of this trend, certainly on the aesthetic level. Shaky handheld cameras, the shabby appearance of many of the exterior shots as well as the fashions present on both shows are a memento of a particular postsocialist 1990s visuality that attempted to emulate Western models, resulting in an abundance of imitations – of brands, of clothing, of food products, etc. If at the time laughing at this inadequacy provided a sense of relief, as I have argued, from the point of view of retrospective reception, contemporary viewers possess the necessary cultural capital to identify imitations and can take enjoyment in their ability to discern them as such, appreciating the deficient aesthetics of the period with irony.

Yet the enduring popularity of both shows rests not only on their function as visual nostalgia triggers. In the case of *ZDCDP*, contemporary interviews with Mann and Materna emphasise the surprising relevance of many gags even today. Some of the show's sketches were so prescient that they have enjoyed a new circulation, especially since the conservative Law and Justice party assumed power in 2015 in Poland, effecting sweeping changes in the judiciary, media legislation and curtailing the rights of women and minorities. For instance, in 2016 many Polish media protested when Law and Justice moved to **limit the number of journalists** who could be present at parliamentary sittings. In a sketch from 1992 entitled "**Interview with a Member of Parliament**", Materna, playing a journalist, asks Mann (the MP) what the parliament discussed. "Were you inside?" the MP asks. "I wasn't because you didn't let journalists in," Materna replies. The politician condescendingly explains: "We didn't let you in, so we wouldn't have to tell. Why should I come out and tell you now? If we wanted to, we would have let you in and then you'd know." As the liberal weekly *Polityka* commented, today the sketch "sounds like a bleak prophecy".⁴¹ In this sense, Mann and Materna's jokes have survived because they capture in hyperbolic manner something of the essence of relationships such as politician/journalist, doctor/nurse, client/businessman, game show host/contestant, in times of upheaval.

Although *ZDCDP* was not strictly speaking political satire and never expressed particular political leanings, more recently both Wojciech Mann and Krzysztof Materna have publicly voiced their disagreement with the conservative politics of Law and Justice. As a result, their sketches find resonance especially among liberal-minded audiences, who see commonalities between the absurdity of the 1990s as satirised in the duo's sketches and the current political situation. This form of reception is encouraged by the authors themselves in interviews. As Mann noted in 2017, "If someone had told me at the beginning of the 1990s that we would find ourselves in the Poland that we have today, I wouldn't have believed them."⁴² Similarly, the Facebook page dedicated to *Česká soda* also mainly comments on current affairs in a satirical manner.

Nevertheless, the memory mode through which *Česká soda* is received emphasises not the similarities of the 1990s with the present day, but rather the otherness and pastness of this decade. As Fila writes, "*Česká soda* has become a myth and emblem of the freedom of the 1990s. Back then, allegedly, there could be crude jokes about anything, while today that is no longer possible."⁴³ Fila goes on to debunk this myth, pointing out that despite a number of particularly abrasive sketches, the show's humour was in fact quite tame. One cannot overlook that indeed many of the show's jokes revelled in simple, even infantile wordplay, making use of homonyms and idiomatic expressions. One news item, for instance, reported that after Prague's largest hospital bought a Gamma knife, they are now fundraising for a Gamma fork – a joke that has no deeper meaning beyond linguistic play (*Česká soda* II, 1993). Fila suggests that "in this emptiness of meaning it is a perfect product of the 1990s, which lacked an aim and an enemy".⁴⁴

Fila thus to an extent confirms the assertions of Mann and Materna that producing satire in a society where everything is allowed is a challenge – the feeling that the newly found freedom actually hampered creativity because there was no longer anything to fight against was a common attitude not only among satirists, but artists in general in post-1989 Eastern Europe. *Česká soda* attempted to combat this creative malaise with shock value; as a site of memory, it finds adherents especially among those who view it with a nostalgia for a time without restrictions, when saying anything, no matter how offensive, was possible. Such a reception is clear from the comments under YouTube clips from the show. "Today it would be impossible to film [this]. Nobody would allow this on TV anymore...those were the times." "In the nineties, there was freedom. Nothing was holy..."⁴⁵ – these are just some of the recurring types of comments under a skit targeting Germans' alleged Nazi leanings. This myth of the 1990s as an era of unrestrained freedom is furthered also by the show's creators. *Česká soda* host and writer Petr Čtvrtníček, for example, said in a 2018 radio interview:

The way in which we made that show, it could absolutely not be broadcast today. The freedom we had in the wild 1990s will never return. We lack the conditions, openness and will that we had back then.⁴⁶

6 Conclusion

As representatives of two early examples of post-socialist satire, *ZDCDP* and *Česká soda* reveal the different forms and functions this format could perform in a rapidly marketizing and democratizing society. The humour of *ZDCDP*

almost always took the side of “ordinary” people – even if it made fun of lack of intelligence, for instance of dim-witted game show contestants, it did not do so with condescension. Rather, it showed regular citizens as bewildered and disoriented in the new reality and mitigated their feelings of inadequacy and shame with laughter. When satirising relationships of power, the show’s writers generally sided with the weaker party – as was the case, for instance, of the recurring sketch about an arrogant and incompetent doctor and his beleaguered nurse. The show’s critique thus aimed at the misuse of positions of power, and those who tried to unfairly outwit others for their own benefit.

Watching *ZCDCP* from today’s perspective reveals a mental landscape of the transformation where ordinary people are seen as constantly faced by an assault of arrogant, incompetent, naive, cunning and opportunistic characters who try to manipulate or fool them in one way or another. By caricaturing and parodying these characteristics, *ZCDCP* could provide a point of relief to laugh at the often-bewildering changes. Its variety-show-inspired format, which mixed comic sketches and TV show parodies with music videos and adverts, covered a wide scope that serves today as a valuable resource for observing not only the changing visuality of the early 1990s (especially as many sketches were shot on location in the streets of Warsaw and elsewhere), but also some of the more nefarious and now largely forgotten social and economic practices arising directly from the transformation process.

Česká soda’s humour, on the other hand, did not present a critique of the mechanisms of power, rather it simply showed powerful individuals as clowns – a form of humour that still appeared novel enough in a society that had until recently not been able to voice practically any critique of those holding political office. *Česká soda* is a product of the transformation and the “wild 1990s” not so much in its content, but in its form that constantly in postmodern manner pushed the limits of public television broadcasting by parodying and questioning the very principle of news broadcasting’s ability to produce meaning and represent a coherent image of reality. *ZCDCP* and *Česká soda* can thus both be understood as TV formats enabled by the transformation and drawing inspiration from it, though in different ways – while *ZCDCP* chose to satirise the ongoing changes directly, whether on the level of everyday practices or television programming, *Česká soda* tested the possibilities of the acceptable in the new conditions of freedom of expression, provocatively forging an understanding of the word “democracy” in its catchphrase as a lack of any restrictions.

The examples discussed in this article demonstrate the versatility of satire as a programming format. Within transforming societies, it could perform several functions. Drawing on different conventions and traditions (new parody, cabaret, theatre of the absurd), postsocialist satire in Poland and Czech Republic was able to expose some of the underlying paradoxes of the realities of introducing the free market and pluralist democracy, as well as poking fun at the formal and visual characteristics of these processes – engaging in both substantive and formal parody. These shows are examples of satire as a transitional format that drew on older traditions of representation, yet took advantage of new possibilities of representation. *ZCDCP* and *Česká soda* both managed to capture something essential about times of marked social and political change in postsocialist countries; as such, they continue to serve as a mnemonic trigger for remembering and revisiting the 1990s for different groups of viewers.

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Notes

1. Aside from press articles, on which this study draws, the existing scholarly literature consists mainly of several MA theses dedicated to television satire in Poland and the Czech Republic. See Katarzyna Goc, "Ewolucja telewizyjnych programów satyrycznych na przykładzie *Kabaretu starszych panów*, *Kabaretu Olgi Lipińskiej* oraz *Za chwilę dalszy ciąg programu*" [The Evolution of Satirical Television Programmes on the Examples of *Cabaret of Older Gentlemen*, *The Cabaret of Olga Lipińska* and *Next Episode in a Moment*], MA thesis, Jagiellonian University, Cracow, 2010; Karolína Jelínková, "Česká politická satira na televizních obrazovkách v porovnání s americkými pořady" [Czech Political Satire on TV Screens in Comparison with American Programmes], MA thesis, Charles University, Prague, 2015; Nikola Pířová, "Proměny české televizní politické satiry po roce 1989" [The Transformations of Czech Political TV Satire after 1989], MA Thesis, Charles University, 2016. The only scholarly article dedicated to *Za chwilę dalszy ciąg programu* is Igor Piotrowski, "Usterka jako symbol transformacji" [Defect as a Symbol of the Transformation], *Mała kultura współczesna*, 10/2013, <https://malakulturawspolczesna.org/2013/10/15/igor-piotrowski-usterka-jako-symbol-transformacji/>.
2. Alice Bardan, "'The Tattlers' Tattle': Fake News, Linguistic National Intimacy, and New Media in Romania", *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture* 10, no. 1 (2012), 150.
3. Anikó Imre, "The Witty Seven: Late Socialist-Capitalist Satire in Hungary", *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture*, 10, no. 1–2 (2012), 133.
4. Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak, "AMERICAN STIOB: Or, what late-socialist aesthetics of parody reveal about contemporary political culture in the West", *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2010), 179–221.
5. See Sabina Mihejl, "Television Entertainment in Socialist Eastern Europe: Between Cold War Politics and Global Developments", in *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism*, eds. Timothy Havens, Anikó Imre and Katalin Lustyik (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 13–29; 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, Anikó Imre and Katalin Lustyik (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 47–64. For the specific case of East German television, see Heather Gumbert, *Envisioning Socialism: Television and the Cold War in the German Democratic Republic* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2014).
6. For a critical summary of the literature on the postsocialist transformations, see Michal Kopeček and Piotr Wciślik, "Introduction: Towards an Intellectual History of Post-Socialism," in *Thinking Through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe after 1989*, eds. Michal Kopeček and Piotr Wciślik (Budapest: CEU Press, 2015), 1–35.
7. Piotrowski, "Usterka jako symbol transformacji."
8. Anikó Imre, "Why Should We Study Socialist Commercials", *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture* 2, no. 3 (2013), 66.
9. Geoffrey Baym and Jeffrey P. Jones, "News Parody in Global Perspective: Politics, Power, and Resistance," *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture* 10, no. 1–2 (2010), 6.
10. Baym and Jones, "News Parody," 4.
11. See Pavel Janoušek et al., *Dějiny české literatury II. 1948–1958* [The History of Czech Literature II. 1948–1958] (Prague: Academia, 2007), 410–420.
12. Anikó Imre, 'The Witty Seven', *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture* 10, no 1–2 (2012), 131–144.
13. Anikó Imre, *TV Socialism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 232.
14. See Goc, "Ewolucja telewizyjnych programów satyrycznych"; for more on the two above-mentioned *kabaret* programmes, see Agnieszka Kozak, "Od *Kabaretu Starszych Panów* do *Kabaretu Olgy Lipińskiej*" [From the *Cabaret of Older Gentlemen* to *The Cabaret of Olga Lipińska*], in *30 najważniejszych programów TV w Polsce* [30 Most Important TV Programmes in Poland], ed. Wiesław Godzić (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Trio TVN S.A., 2005), 101–110.
15. See Goc, "Ewolucja telewizyjnych programów satyrycznych", 59; Piotrowski, "Usterka jako symbol transformacji;" "Powązka: Latający cyrk pana Manna" [Powązka: Mr Mann's Flying Circus], *Dziennik Zachodni* 3 December 2012, <https://dziennikzachodni.pl/powazka-latajacy-cyrk-pana-manna/ar/711581>; Aleksandr Majewski, "Za chwilę dalszy ciąg programu. Pamiętacie polskich pythonów?" [Next Episode in a Moment: Do you remember the Polish Pythons?], *W Polityce*, 2 June 2013, <https://wpolityce.pl/kultura/248254-za-chwile-dalszy-ciag-programu-pamietacie-polskich-pythonow>.
16. Milan Tesař, "Nedokončený test z demokracie" [An Unfinished Test of Democracy], *Lidové noviny*, 9 December 2012, 11.
17. Soňa Oulová, "Proměna televizní estrády v českých zemích" [The Development of Television Estrada in the Czech Lands], MA Thesis, Charles University, Prague, 2014.
18. See Paweł Piotrowicz, "Krzysztof Materna: w życiu ważny jest święty spokój" [Krzysztof Materna: What Matters in Life Is to Have Peace], *Onet.pl*, 28 October 2018, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/krzysztof-materna-w-zyciu-wazny-jest-swiety-spokoj-wywiad/re48dtl>.
19. Vladimír Just, "Potíže se zábavou" [Problems with Entertainment], *Lidové noviny*, 14 June 1994.

20. Michał Nogaś, “Striptizerka miała zawał. Mann i Materna: co zrobić, żeby w Polsce nie było ponuro” [The Stripper Had a Heart Attack. Mann and Materna: What to Do So that Poland Is Not Gloomy], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 14 October 2017, <https://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,22508738,striptizerka-miala-zawal-mann-i-materna-co-zrobic-zeby-w-polsce.html>.
21. Examples include *S polityki netančím* (I Don’t Dance with Politicians, Czech Television, 1995–2000), which later migrated to the private channel Nova, and *Szkoło kontaktowe* (Contact Glass, TVN24, 2005–) in Poland.
22. With the rise of internet television, the Czech internet channel *Stream* experienced success with its satirical sitcom *Kancelář Blaník* (The Blaník Bureau, 2014–2017), loosely inspired by the BBC show *The Thick of It*. A similar format satirizing the Law and Justice party in Poland was broadcast on YouTube and later Showmax as *Ucho Prezesa* (The Chairman’s Ear, 2017–2019).
23. Nogaś, “Striptizerka miała zawał”.
24. The Polish Television Archives (*Ośrodek dokumentacji i zbiorów Telewizji Polskiej*) do not possess any statistics on ZCDCP ratings and electronic rating collection only began in 1996 in Poland, i.e. after the show ended. The radio interview in question was broadcast on Polish Radio Programme III on 7 January 2009 and is available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=do6nOkMxttU&ab_channel=PawelRozwadowski
25. Dorota Ostrowska, “The Carnival of the Absurd: Stanisław Bareja’s *Alternatywy 4* and Polish Television in the 1980s”, in *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism*, eds. Timothy Havens, Anikó Imre and Katalin Lustyik (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 65–80.
26. The Polish Television Archives do not have a complete list of episodes of the show, nor a record of episodes in the order of their production. For this reason, episodes referred to in the text are not numbered.
27. Magda Szcześniak, *Normy widzialności: Tożsamość w czasach transformacji* [Norms of Visuality: Identity in the Times of Transformation] (Warsaw: Fundacja Nowej Kultury Bęc Zmiana, 2016), 48.
28. Irena Reifová, “Shaming the Working Class in Post-Socialist Reality Television,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 5 (2021), 1071–1088.
29. Szcześniak, *Normy widzialności*, 43–45.
30. For more on the outburst of nudity in public space after 1989, see Adéla Gjuričová, “Revoluce odkládá sametový háv: erotika a nahé tělo v českém veřejném prostoru po roce 1989” [The Revolution is Setting Aside Its Velvet Robe: Eroticism and the Naked Body in the Czech Public Space after 1989], *Dějiny a současnost* 33, no. 11 (2011), 40–43.
31. Piotrowski, “Usterka jako symbol transformacji”.
32. Kamil Fila, “Mýtus České sody” [The Myth of Czech Soda Water], 7 February 2020, <http://web.archive.org/web/20210620095213/https://www.jestevetsikritik.cz/texty-zdarma/988-mytus-ceske-sody>.
33. Quoted in Josef Chuchma, “Pravá česká soda” [True Czech Soda], *Respekt*, 30 August 1993, 22.
34. Czech Television Records Archive, Prague, Czech Republic. SOUČ 1995 – 147; Centre for Programme and Auditorium Analysis – Letters from Viewers. SOUČ 1995 –148; Centre for Programme and Auditorium Analysis – Opinions and Feedback of Viewers via Telephone.
35. Jan Foll, “Nejapná zkouška” [An Inane Test], *Lidové noviny*, 7 July 1993, 5.
36. Chuchma, “Pravá česká soda”.
37. Czech Television Archives, Prague, Czech Republic. Broadcast introduction transcript. Provys programme database. *Česká soda IV*, 31 July 1993.
38. The film version of *Česká soda* was seen by 165 000 viewers and ranked 11th on the list of the year’s most visited films in cinemas.
39. These include an active Facebook group, an internet discussion forum (last active in 2020), and the account “jarecki83” is just one of the YouTube users compiling together as many episodes of Mann and Materna’s work as possible.
40. These include, for example, Olga Drenda’s exploration of the changing material and cultural worlds of the transformation *Duchologia polska* [Polish Hauntology] (Cracow: Karakter, 2016); the illustrated coffee table publications Ivan Motýl, ed., *Taková byla 90. léta: obrazy z poslední dekády 20. století* [Such Were the 90s: Images from the Last Decade of the 20th Century] (Prague: Empress Media, 2016); Dušan Radovanovič, ed., *Svobodná a divoká 90. léta: příběhy z doby, kdy bylo možné téměř vše* [The Free and Wild 1990s: Stories from a Time When Almost Anything Was Possible] (Prague: Radioservis, 2017); Johana Fundová, *Devadesátky! Roky nespoutané svobody* [Nineties! Years of Unrestrained Freedom] (Brno: CPRESS, 2019); in both countries, a number of popular journal issues and radio programmes have also been dedicated to the pop-memory of the decade, such as the thematic issue of the cultural internet magazine *Malá kultura współczesna* [Small Contemporary Culture], October 2013, <https://malakulturawspolczesna.org/category/lata-dziewiecdziesiate-kultura-nadmiar-u-w-czasach-niedomiaru-102013/>
41. Polityka.pl, “‘Jakbyśmy chcieli, tobyśmy wpuścili.’ Mann i Materna to przewidzieli” [‘If We Wanted to, We Would Have Let Them In.’ Mann and Materna Foresaw It] *Polityka*, 16 December 2016, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/1687346,1.jakbysmy-chcieli-tobysmy-wpuscili-mann-i-materna-to-przewidzieli.read>.
42. Nogaś, “Striptizerka miała zawał.”
43. Fila, “Mýtus České sody.”
44. Ibid.

45. Comments from 2020 and 2022 by users Michal Hill and Zbyněk Čech respectively, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2gHjW8TRQZo>.
46. Barbora Tachecí, "Česká soda by dnes byla nevysílatelná. Chybí svoboda a otevřenost, říká Petr Čtvrtníček" [Česká soda would be unbroadcastable today. We lack freedom and openness, says Petr Čtvrtníček], *Český rozhlas Plus*, 31 December 2018, <https://plus.rozhlas.cz/ceska-soda-dnes-byla-nevysilatelna-chybi-svoboda-a-otevrenost-rika-petr-7714677>.

Biography

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