

Anikó Imre

## Why Should We Study Socialist Commercials?

2013-06-30

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/14071>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Imre, Anikó: Why Should We Study Socialist Commercials?. In: *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture*, Jg. 2 (2013-06-30), Nr. 3, S. 65–76. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/14071>.

### Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/10.18146/2213-0969.2013.jethc033>

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen 4.0 Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Share Alike 4.0 License. For more information see:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>

# WHY SHOULD WE STUDY SOCIALIST COMMERCIALS?

Anikó Imre

The Bryan Singer Division of Critical Studies,  
School of Cinematic Arts  
University of Southern California,  
University Park, SCA 319  
Los Angeles, CA 90089-2211  
[imre@usc.edu](mailto:imre@usc.edu)

**Abstract:** This article looks at television's so far neglected contribution as a relay and interpretive framework at the intersection of postsocialist memory and history studies. It zooms in on postsocialist nostalgia as a relational expression of a heterogeneous set of desires that operate in an intercultural network. Televisual nostalgia also implicates Western Europe and makes explicit a Western European longing for the divided Europe of the Cold War. This longing, in turn, shores up Europe's repressed imperial history. Television's role at the pressure points of postsocialist institutional and economic policy, consumption and narrative concerns makes it an indispensable window into the intertwined workings of nostalgia and nationalism within a postcolonial Europe.

**Keywords:** postsocialism, television, nostalgia, history, memory

## 1 Television Between "History" And "Memory"

"History" and "memory" are two of the key phrases that have channeled and framed academic research on the Soviet Empire's transition to a postsocialist form of capitalism. It is common to see the two terms juxtaposed in the titles of publications, courses and conferences to distinguish between two different modes of remembering: "history" calls up official, public and professional modes such as commemoration and musealization, while "memory" implies unofficial, popular and private modes frequently associated with nostalgia and consumerism. The two areas are typically assigned to different research areas as well: history on the one hand and cultural anthropology or cultural studies on the other. "Memory" and "history" have also been favored by scholars in surrounding humanities fields such as Slavic studies and film studies as categories of analysis applied to literary and cinematic texts that foreground some form of preoccupation with the past.

Television only enters discussions about memory and history fleetingly. This may not seem so surprising at first glance since much of television programming is attached to the present and the everyday. At times, the medium has been accused of undermining memory and perpetuating a sense of ephemerality and transience.<sup>1</sup> Despite its amnesiac

<sup>1</sup> Amy Holdsworth, "Television Resurrections: Television and Memory," *Cinema Journal* 47, 3, 2008, p. 137; Milly Buonanno, *Italian TV Drama and Beyond: Stories from the Soil, Stories from the Sea*, Intellect, 2012, p. 199

qualities, however, television is also a powerful mnemonic tool. This is not a contradiction: it is precisely TV's propensity to resonate in different temporalities at once that has lent the medium a sense of living connections among the past, present and future. As John Ellis puts it, television brings history alive because it is a constituent part of the everyday lives of citizens; it is a vehicle for the transformation of and a source of information about the quotidian.<sup>2</sup> Gary Edgerton goes as far as to claim that 'television is the principal means by which most people learn about history today.'<sup>3</sup> It is a primary generator of collective memory, where popular and professional histories inevitably mingle.<sup>4</sup> This is why, matching the rise of interest in history among the general population, historical drama is in high currency on North American and Western European television in the twenty-first century across genres such as biography, pseudo-documentary and period drama series.<sup>5</sup> Historical television drama provides viewers with a 'useable past' that is always related to and relevant to the concerns of the present.<sup>6</sup>

In the postsocialist region, the past has especially sensitive nerve endings in the present. Virtually any instance of communication, public or private, is saturated with historical reflection. This near-obsessive concern with history has been consistently identified as one of the core features of film, literature and other arts produced during the Cold War period. However, it has taken on even greater urgency after the collapse of socialism as national regimes and individual citizens alike have tried to revive usable paradigms of identity from past periods to clear away or at least cover up the historical debris left behind by socialism. Television is a massive archaeological site for exploring the socialist period and its continued afterlife. It connects professional histories with everyday memories. It provides valuable information about how high and popular cultural production and consumption are interwoven politically, aesthetically and economically. In the process, it foregrounds how deeply the pursuits of historians, political scientists, anthropologists, literary and media scholars are interlinked. And yet, it is precisely this polymorphic, undefinable identity with tentacles in several fields that makes television so confusing and even threatening in academic and political treatments of history.

Television is a puzzling object because it muddles the differences between the two kinds of practices and corresponding research approaches lined up behind "memory" and "history." And when it comes to studying how postsocialist communities understand their relationship to history, particularly the recent past, there seems to be more at stake than elsewhere in keeping history and memory practices separate and in minimizing the role of television and other popular media. Downplaying the importance of television as a resource is motivated by nationalistic investments in keeping distinct public and private, state and commercial, high and popular, masculine and feminine registers of culture. Nationalism is not only deployed by opportunistic parties and governments in the service of selective remembering (and forgetting); but, in more subtle ways, it also provides an implicit epistemological grid often adopted even by those researchers who are open to cross-cultural, comparative research of memory practices.

## 2 Television History And Postsocialist Nostalgia

Television's messy status as a medium has a long legacy in the region. While the communist parties of the 1950s technically owned the new institution, its purpose and potential remained something of a mystery to them until well into the 1960s. It eluded centralized control from the beginning. Communist parties tried to mould it to their own purposes: they developed centralized programming to standardize citizens' everyday, domestic life rhythms. But they were also compelled to sever content from the actual experience of socialism, which invariably fell short of the idealistic picture delivered by party-approved programming. In the early decades, this contradictory goal yielded cheerleading docufictions, educational quiz shows, uplifting entertainment such as theatrical broadcasts of Russian and European classics, doctored news, limited advertising, and domestically produced dramatic series focused

2 John Ellis, 'Television and History,' *History Workshop Journal* 56, Fall 2003, p. 181.

3 Gary R. Edgerton, 'Introduction: Television as a Historian: A Different Kind of History Altogether,' In *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, eds. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins, University Press of Kentucky, 2001, p. 1.

4 Edgerton, p. 5

5 Edgerton, p. 1; Buonanno

6 Edgerton, p. 3.

firmly on the romanticized historical past, rather than the present.<sup>7</sup> However, these efforts could not be sealed off in an airtight spatiotemporal vacuum. The gap between the projective ideals and the actual experiential realities of socialism created a layer of ironic distance between television and its viewers. This was exacerbated by the increasing influx of information about capitalist lifestyles and consumer products despite even the most repressive states' efforts to minimize it. By the 1980s of late socialism, television had turned into the primary medium of a mode of ironic overidentification,<sup>8</sup> which characterized life under late socialism in most countries of the region.

Ironic overidentification gave way to nostalgia in the early 1990s, following the Soviet Empire's disintegration. Postsocialist nostalgia has proven so powerful that an entire field of scholarly and popular analysis has also swiftly sprung up to make sense of it. Strangely, however, even this research has evaded television. My main point here is that the evasion of television allows for nostalgia to be misframed and misappropriated as a sentiment that marks the end of socialism temporally and clearly demarcates backward-looking postsocialist populations from forward-looking (Western) observers. In this widespread view, immortalized by *Good-Bye Lenin!* (dir. Wolfgang Becker, 2003), postsocialist nostalgia is a near-visceral yearning for the false sense of safety derived from the memory of socialism, fetishistically attached to public personas or consumer products of the past. However, precisely because television has resisted the binary schemes of political control and the disciplinary divides that continue to parcel out "proper" research areas on (post)socialism, its potential to muddle these neat spatio-temporal divisions is immense. The groundwork for assessing television's role in shaping memory and history has only begun to be laid by scholars such as Irena Reifová, Dana Mustata, Zala Volčič, Sabina Mihelj and a handful of others. I propose to build on this groundwork an expanded framework for assessing postsocialist nostalgia that takes into account television's relevance to collective memory.

### 3 Nostalgia Is A Post-Cold War Interpretive Framework

This framework borrows from the work of scholars who link nostalgia with a sense of intimate sociality disrupted by the collapse of a centralized system of governance and the influx of globalization. Anthropologists Dominic Boyer and Maya Nadkarni, historian Maria Todorova and literary scholar Svetlana Boym propose that postsocialist nostalgia is a discourse that is not specific to Eastern Europe populations disappointed with and unequipped to deal with the advent of market democracy who pine for a backward socialist past. Rather, it is a relational expression of heterogeneous desires that operate in an intercultural network. As I show, televisual nostalgia, which has been largely absent from research on postsocialist nostalgia, implicates Western Europe and makes explicit a Western European longing for the divided Europe of the Cold War. This longing, in turn, shores up Europe's repressed imperial history. Television, at the pressure points of postsocialist institutional and economic policy, consumption and narrative concerns, is an indispensable window into the intertwined workings of nostalgia and nationalism within a postcolonial Europe.

I propose that, more than a certain way or content of longing, postsocialist nostalgia is also an interpretive framework for understanding post-Cold War Europe's living relationship with its socialist history. This interpretive framework is in synergy with cultural practices around television, a medium whose chief mode of operation is in reruns, recombinations, circulating formats and generic adaptations that constantly interweave national, regional and global scales. I start by extracting postsocialist nostalgia from the essentialist narrative that derives the phenomenon exclusively from a regional character and a particular historical moment of rupture. Instead, I draw on Dominic Boyer's work to trace nostalgia back to the intellectual origins of European cultural nationalisms. This history of the intimate connection between cultural nationalism and nostalgia sheds light on the gendered and raced intellectual disdain for television as a legitimate archive of memories and histories today.

Against this historical and conceptual background, I then begin to develop a typology of contemporary televisual nostalgia in the postsocialist region. Rather than simply juxtaposing the specificities of national memory systems

7 Anikó Imre, 'National History and Cross-National Television Edutainment,' *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 40, 3, Fall 2012, p. 119-130.

8 See Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak, 'Postsocialist Studies, Cultures of Parody and American Stib,' *Anthropology News*, November 2008, p. 9-10.

mediated by television, I single out examples that demonstrate why taking seriously television's contribution to postsocialist nostalgia disrupts the entrenched models of both popular media studies and studies of postsocialism – models that have also been politically neutralized and embedded within Eastern European research paradigms. Therefore, I close by zooming in on the genre of late socialist television commercials, which have released a massive outpouring of nostalgia. Socialist commercials are a neglected but all the more informative resource for reframing postsocialist nostalgia as a set of diverse and contradictory sentiments that make us see European cultures conjoined in mutual relationships of dependence, rather than separation; and that make us see late socialism and postsocialism in continuity, rather than divided by historical rupture.

## 4 Nostalgia And The Politics Of European Cultural Nationalism

I see nostalgia as something by definition national at its core. This is what makes it easy to be appropriated in the service of nationalistic party politics as well as for commercial gain. Postsocialist nostalgia, however, is not simply an alternative expression of nationalism merging with consumerism.<sup>9</sup> Rather, it foregrounds the coexistence of different temporalities, or living socialisms in the present. Postsocialist nostalgia also implies the overlap and interaction of different geopolitical vectors across space: while it has identifiable regional features, the different temporalities of the nation-states concerned don't necessarily overlap within the region. For instance, as Zsuzsa Gille notes, postsocialist nostalgia in Romania is similar in structure to late socialist nostalgia of the 1980s in Hungary.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, expressions of postsocialist nostalgia are embedded in and respond to discourses that are European and global in scale. Postsocialist nostalgia sets in conversation a variety of expressions that process the end of the Cold War and the alleged demise of socialism as a viable political and economic form of governance. Describing nostalgia as something that originates in or is a property of a particular East European state of mind is itself a politicized assumption that implies a clear and final break between socialism and its superior "posts."

In the post-Soviet region, as elsewhere, nostalgia almost invariably finds expression in TV memories shared within – and often across -- national communities. As Dominic Boyer explains, nostalgia and nationalism have shared roots in the history of Central and Eastern Europe. The term "nostalgia" was coined by German medical university student Johannes Hofer in his 1688 dissertation.<sup>11</sup> Hofer's notion diagnosed the "condition" of students and other intellectuals who were studying away from their homes in German-speaking towns of Eastern and Central Europe. These intellectuals organized themselves into so-called *natio*s in order to manage feelings of dislocation.<sup>12</sup> The university, the main site of reproduction for the educated middle classes, also became an institutional site of germinating nationalisms, where, by the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the *natio*s turned into sites of zealous patriotic competition. For Hofer and his contemporaries, nostalgia was an early expression of longing for what began to be identified at the same time as national homes. Hofer merely identified nationalism as a physiological state, something that has 'widespread consequences for European nationalism.'<sup>13</sup>

This history highlights an enduring component of Eastern European nationalisms: that nations were first construed by and continued to be shaped by the ideas of intellectuals and the educated middle classes.<sup>14</sup> One of the consequences is the preference for literature and high art as expressions of what has been identified as *cultural nationalism*<sup>15</sup>, and

9 Dominic Boyer likens postsocialist nostalgia to Bakhtin's heteroglossia to illustrate its complexity. See Dominic Boyer, 'From Algos to Autonomos: Nostalgic Eastern Europe as Postimperial Mania,' in *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, eds. Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille, Berghahn Books, 2010, p. 19

10 Zsuzsa Gille, 'Postscript,' in *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, eds. Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille, Berghahn Books, 2010, p. 279

11 Boyer 2008, p. 363

12 Boyer 2008, p. 365

13 Boyer 2010, p. 367

14 Or *Gebildeten*, as they were called in German. See Boyer, 2008.

15 See Joep Leerssen, 'Nationalism and the Cultivation of Culture,' *Nations and Nationalism* 12, 4, 2006, p. 559-578.

the perceived illegitimacy of popular cultural production and consumption. This strict, top-down cultural hierarchy has continued to organize the contents of collective memory into the present day. However, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century of a varied and globalized media landscape, cultural nationalism could not be contained any more under a central lid the way it was under socialist party control. Socialist governments had continued to pledge support for socialist internationalism and a democratic culture for all classes. However, this translated into top-down, paternalistic policies that disseminated European and national classics of literature and art. This explains why a large number of formerly dissident Eastern European intellectuals took an overtly nationalistic, nostalgic stand in the 1990s in favor of “national tradition” – that is tradition invested in high art.

The inherent conservatism of high culture had been formerly concealed by the allegedly rebellious, “dissident” status of intellectuals, a status contingent on Western approval of their cause as “good nationalism.” With the cause of anti-socialist nationalism a thing of the past, this nationalistic conservatism has also exposed its more damaging racialized and gendered foundations. Elsewhere I write about the racialized underpinnings of allegedly “pure” aesthetic judgments inherent in the critical assessment of Roma and Black television stars.<sup>16</sup> Here I want to highlight television’s threat to a predominantly male national intelligentsia, whose investment in the class power conferred on them by nationalism is duly threatened by a medium associated with femininity and mass culture.<sup>17</sup>

Television’s dominant position within the domestic environment and its special appeal to an emotionally available female or feminine consumer have been well-established.<sup>18</sup> While socialist television addressed its viewers as masculinized national citizens in the first place, it was also the instrument through which desire for entertainment and consumer products most commonly seeped into socialist lives. Television was *the* mass medium of the socialist period. As such, it constantly posed the danger of a passive, mindless consumption of formulaic narratives – a danger that has been ascribed to women’s inferior psychosocial needs and tastes as opposed to the cerebral modernist masculinity of art.

Irena Carpentier Reifová, Kateřina Gillárová and Radim Hladík, in one of the very few empirical audience studies of television-mediated nostalgia around the Czech series *Vyprávěj*, which revisits shared socialist memories, argue that the first attempts to compensate for the displaced memories of socialism in the 1990s took place ‘in the demiworld of popular culture,’ below the radar of official state politics and elite intellectual culture. Popular culture, and television in particular, remain the principal sites where people can experience the socialist past within the present without having to face public reproach. As the authors show, television not only makes history an important part of its programming, but is also indispensable in stimulating collective memory among diverse groups of viewers thanks to its capacity for personalization and narrativization.<sup>19</sup>

### [Vyprávěj, Season 3](#), ‘Smrt Brezneva’ (transl. ‘The Death of Brezhnev’)

Equally important, the cultural nationalism that continues to repudiate television as an instrument of history also has a European aspect. It mimics and amplifies aspects of Western European cultural nationalisms, which have served as models to Eastern European nationalisms from the start. Post-socialist nostalgia as an epistemological grid helps uncover how the postcolonial dynamic continues to haunt post-Cold War Europe in the throes of media globalization. The post-unification relationship between the two Germanies that generated “Ostalgie” can be extended to describe a post-Cold War European pattern. In common understanding, “Ostalgie” is a natural property of the backward-looking former East. Some scholars suggest, however, that “Ostalgie” is largely a West German projection of a sense of

16 Anikó Imre, ‘Love to Hate: National Intimacy and Racial Intimacy on Reality TV in the New Europe,’ Forthcoming in *Television and New Media*, 2013 (published online in 2011).

17 Tania Modleski, ‘Femininity as Mas(s)querade: A Feminist Approach to Mass Culture,’ in *Feminism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, eds. Mary Evans, Routledge, 2000, 322-332; Andreas Huyssen, ‘Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other,’ in Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Indiana University Press, 1986, p. 44-64.

18 See Lynne Joyrich, ‘All that television allows: TV, melodrama, postmodernism and consumer culture,’ in *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, eds. Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 1992, p. 227-252; Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, University of Chicago Press, 1992.

19 Irena Carpentier Reifová, Kateřina Gillárová, Radim Hladík, ‘The Way We Applauded: How Popular Culture Stimulates Collective Memory of the Socialist Past in Czechoslovakia – the Case of the Television Serial *Vyprávěj* and its Viewers,’ in *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism*, eds. Anikó Imre, Timothy Havens and Katalin Lustyik, Routledge, 2012, p. 199-221.



disappointment onto East Germans, who are ostensibly shocked by and unprepared for the transition to democratic capitalism. The notion of an inherently nostalgic and pre-modern postsocialist population, by implication, props up Western Europe as the epicentre of progressive, scientific modernity.

Rather than a longing for the GDR by naïve East Germans going through the shock of transition and a way to monetize socialist memorabilia on the post-unification market, Dominic Boyer argues that “Ostalgie” is the symptom of a historical blaming game between the two Germanies over who is responsible for nationalism, ‘die Deutsche Krankheit’ that had led to Fascism. As long as there were two Germanies, they could each defer the guilt over Nazism to the other and suppress it at home. However, after reunification, the finger came to be pointed firmly by the more powerful and richer Germany to the one on the losing end of the Cold War. “Ostalgie” can thus be seen as the outcome of West Germany’s deferment of bad nationalism onto the East. In Boyer’s analysis of the film *Good-Bye Lenin* and the nostalgic Burda magazine *Super Illu*, both produced by West Germans, “Ostalgie” confers a split temporality on post-unification Germany: easterners are naturally affiliated with the past and westerners with the future, which makes the latter the proper representatives of Germany.<sup>20</sup>

Extending this dynamic onto a European scale, Boyer calls the West’s fanning of East European nostalgia a ‘post-imperial symptom.’<sup>21</sup> It is an expression of a growing Western European awareness that modernity is plurinodal rather than centred in European metropolitan headquarters.

In this postimperial environment, the need for Eastern Europe as a *still lesser* node, a space that Western Europe can still suppose itself to dominate, has been vital. Indeed, the post-1989 Western European obsession with Eastern Europe’s obsession with the past must be understood as an anxious lateral signal that the pastness of Eastern Europe can no longer be taken for granted.<sup>22</sup>

Gerd Gemünden gives a perfect example of how cultural nationalism and nostalgia are intertwined to support defensive, elitist European revisionism. In Germany, some of the most prominent (West German) intellectuals, such as directors Wim Wenders and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg and playwright Botho Strauss, have famously revised their formerly cosmopolitan positions and outlined what are utopian national rebirth scenarios for a united Germany. In the wake of reunification, all three published controversial essays that consider the suppression of German nationalism after World War II harmful because it opened the gate to the influx of American audio-visual culture. The latter must be resisted in order to preserve and nourish German culture in its purest, literary manifestation. These intellectuals look nostalgically to the former GDR as an authentic resource for reinvigorating true German culture, which had been ostensibly frozen and preserved there during the Cold War.<sup>23</sup> According to Gemünden, this proposed logocentric return to the ethos of German Romanticism is linked to a new nationalism that wants to do away with the results of Western integration over the last forty years. He writes:

The eighteenth-century notion of *Kulturnation* (that is, the idea of a shared literature, music, art, philosophy and so forth) that provides a certain cultural identity in lieu of nationhood is invoked with all its cliché-ridden, elitist and racist implications.<sup>24</sup>

This postimperial European dimension considerably complicates the cultural politics of postsocialist nostalgia in Eastern Europe. On the one hand, postsocialist nostalgia is a response to and repudiation of Westerners’ own longing for socialism, constructed as a culture of scarcity where people yearn for Western goods and freedoms and are happy to get rid of toppled statues. This repudiation tends to find its expression precisely in socialist television and other popular objects nervously excluded from official discourses of nationalism. On the other hand, postsocialist nostalgia also includes elements of acquiescence to the Western fascination with the supposedly naïve gaze with which the

20 Boyer 2008, 372

21 Boyer, 2008

22 Boyer 2010, 23

23 Gerd Gemünden, ‘Nostalgia for the Nation: Intellectuals and National Identity in Unified Germany,’ in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, Leo Spitzer, Dartmouth University Press, 1999, p. 123.

24 Gemünden p. 127.

East stares back at the West. This is a form of assimilation to Europe and of dues to pay for inclusion in the European Union.<sup>25</sup> For this latter sentiment, most often embraced by artists and intellectuals, nostalgia released by television and popular culture in general tends to be too muddy and uncontrollable. It threatens to trouble the aspirational narrative of the Eurocentric postsocialist nation that has fully returned to the Europe to which it has culturally always already belonged thanks to its high artistic and intellectual achievements.

As a consequence, taking on the study of nostalgia in popular television as a worthy pursuit in Eastern Europe is not a simple extension of Western television or media studies to uncharted territory. It also involves acknowledging and confronting a postimperial power dynamic that presents Western and Eastern researchers with very different stakes. While the former possess the necessary political capital to afford studying popular media, the latter have to insist first on faithfully fulfilling the role assigned to them, which is to represent their national cultures in terms of its elite achievements lest they risk feminization by association with popular culture.

Jérôme Bourdon et al. ask in their chapter in the book *A European Television History* two important questions. The first one is: “What do Europeans have in common?” Their response is that the most obvious commonality is a focus on high culture. They follow up by asking whether there is specificity to European cultures of popular television. In my view, this question can only be properly answered if one takes into account the different investments in cultural nationalism on the two sides formerly separated by the Iron Curtain. In the absence of such a postimperial perspective, the answer will continue to fall back on centralizing the West and forgetting about the East or, at best, treating it as a nostalgic extension in a continual state of catch-up.<sup>26</sup>

In the introduction to the collection *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, co-editor Maria Todorova asks a related question: “Can we offer a typology of post-communist nostalgia, one that is also sufficiently discriminating between regional and national differences?”<sup>27</sup> In response, she lists the “spheres of life or genres” in which postsocialist nostalgia is expressed: “Here we have everything in the oral domain from casual conversations to scholarly interviews, and genres from song and literature to film”.<sup>28</sup> It is telling that television does not qualify as a “sphere of life or genre” of nostalgia. Indeed, none of the 15 chapters in this substantial collection deal with television.

In the final part of this essay, therefore, I want to contribute to the typology of postsocialist nostalgia by taking television into account. In the same breath, I follow up on the question posed by Bourdon et al. about the specificity of European popular television by identifying certain national and regional patterns of television-mediated postsocialist nostalgia. Television historians have repeatedly reminded of the importance of considering the national specificities of memory systems developed around television.<sup>29</sup> It is equally important to stress, however, that this requires more than a simple extension of the repertoire of examples within an existing paradigm. Rather, it takes an intervention, a recognition that the paradigms of popular media studies have developed within and continue to neutralize a West-East hierarchy within Europe, which has also been deeply internalized in the research paradigms influenced by Eastern European cultural nationalisms.

## 5 Modes Of Postsocialist TV Nostalgia

If we want to generate a typology of postsocialist televisual nostalgia at the level of specificity afforded Western Europe, we will quickly notice a variety of different relations between socialist histories and postsocialist

25 Maya Nadkarni, “But it’s ours”: Nostalgia and the Politics of Authenticity in Post-Socialist Hungary.’ In *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, eds. Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille, Berghahn, 2010, p. 204.

26 Jérôme Bourdon, with Juan Carlos Ibañez, Catherine Johnson and Eggo Müller, ‘Searching for an Identity for Television: Programmes, Genres, Formats,’ In *A European Television History*, eds. Jonathan Bignell and Andreas Fickers, Blackwell, 2008, p. 101-126.

27 Maria Todorova, ‘Introduction: From Utopia to Propaganda and Back,’ In *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, eds. Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille, Berghahn, 2010, p. 7.

28 Todorova, p. 9

29 See Charlotte Brunson, ‘Is Television Studies History?’ *Cinema Journal*, 47, 3, 2008, p. 127-134; and Amy Holdsworth, ‘Television Resurrections: Television and Memory,’ *Cinema Journal*, 47, 3, 2008, p. 137-143.



developments. We are also bound to conclude that some nostalgic features actually make some cultures more similar to Western nations than to other nations within the region. Various modes and objects of nostalgia also coexist within national cultures or are identifiable across borders.

For instance, post-Soviet nostalgia has left a markedly different trace on television in Russia than in the Soviet Union's formerly colonized satellite states. As Kateryna Khinkulova explains, state-sponsored nostalgia has become the dominant mode of television, the result of the Putin government's attempts at re-centralization.<sup>30</sup> Since the leading channels in Russia are owned either by the state or by media groups loyal to the government, the Kremlin retains a significant influence over television. This situation has favoured programming that selectively reinvents Soviet television tradition in the shape of programmes of high cultural quality saturated by a postimperial discourse of cultural superiority. In terms of content, literary adaptations by Russian classics have been revived, along with Soviet films and historical series such as the WWII drama *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (1973).

*Seventeen Moments of Spring*, with the iconic opening piano solo.

Even adaptations of global reality formats have tended to feature old Soviet stars. Khinkulova contrasts this self-aggrandizing nationalistic "quality" brand with the brand-new television system of the Ukraine, which was eager to shed off Soviet control after the country's independence from the Soviet Union, embraced investment by global corporations and welcomed program imports. In place of nostalgia for the television of the Soviet past, Khinkulova argues, the dominant mode is a desire for a Western (European) future.<sup>31</sup>

In the past decade virtually all postsocialist governments have moved towards re-centralizing control over television, particularly over public broadcasters. However, there is variation as to what kinds of television memories are strategically selected - and what kinds are erased - to generate nostalgic nationalism. Unlike Putin's postimperial Russian government, which has attached its TV programming to a literary Soviet heritage, the current Hungarian administration led by the two-thirds majority party FIDESZ has sought to secure support for its right-wing nationalistic policies by resuscitating populist programming from socialist television. The three public broadcasters are essentially under party control. Two of them were transformed from socialist broadcasters. While the first channel, M1, closely resembles an ideological party device not unlike it was under socialism, M2 has been recently reconfigured as a nostalgia machine (after a previously announced and then abandoned plan to turn it into a children's channel that would show mostly old socialist children's programmes). Since 2010, several nostalgia programmes have been launched on M2. *2-es retro* ("Retro on the 2") began in April 2012 as a late night variety program where contemporary actors and actresses perform the quaint role of the programme announcer to introduce musical programmes, cabaret shows and biographies that showcase the oeuvre of popular performers from the past. These depoliticized reminiscences generate an image of socialist sociality as a natural connecting glue among citizens gathered around the warm glow of their favourite singers and cabaret actors. It exploits the entrenched view of TV as "just entertainment." Ironically, this nostalgic image erases not only state socialist governments' own disdain for populist programming in favour of cultural nationalist education but also the television's history of ongoing negotiation with party politics.

*2-es retro* revives the quaint role of the announcer

The third public broadcaster, Duna TV, began in 1992 as the first Hungarian channel broadcast over satellite, with a remit to serve a broader Hungarian-speaking community in the neighbouring diasporas (with the main studio in Budapest but regional stations in Romania, Slovakia and Serbia and the Ukraine) as well as North and South America and Australia. As a channel dedicated to nurturing a Hungarian audiovisual heritage, it is by definition nostalgic and nationalistic. It specializes in rerunning vintage highbrow content: old films, television series and documentaries. Under FIDESZ guardianship, it has added to its repertoire a series of "remakes" of socialist programmes addressing rural viewers, such as the folk music talent competition show *Főlszállott a páva* ("The Peacock Has Taken Off"), which renews the long-running program *Röpülj páva!* ("Fly, Peacock!"), broadcast on M1 between 1969 and 1981.

30 Kateryna Khinkulova, 'Hello, Lenin? Nostalgia on Post-Soviet Television in Russia and Ukraine,' VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture, 1, 2, 2012

31 Idem. Although one suspects that this televisual Eurocentrism is also appropriated by national parties and governments and serves retrograde, ultranationalist directions.

Vocal performance of folk song from the final of the 2012 season of  
Fölszállott a páva ('The Peacock Has Taken Off')

Excerpt from one of the numerous broadcasts of the original Röpülj páva! ('Fly, Peacock!')

Public radio also launched a new channel in December 2012 entirely dedicated to a genre of "light" folk music with catchy tunes and simple lyrics especially popular among rural listeners – FIDESZ's largest voting base. The current regime's cynicism reveals itself in the fact that they named the new station Radio Dankó after Pista Dankó, a popular Roma musician, whose career is meant to prove that you can work your way up to the top if you're hard-working, talented and dedicated, according to the official rationale. This rationale is promoted by the same regime that has fostered an atmosphere of alarming racism and anti-Semitism and whose drastic neoliberal economic restructuring has pulled much of the remaining social safety net from under the poor, thanks to policies that have disproportionately affected the Roma.

At the same time, the FIDESZ government eliminated the five provincial public service radio channels and concentrated Hungarian Radio's operations in Budapest in order to control all news programs – undermining the government's own stated intention to cater to rural listeners. The ironies don't stop here. Concentrating the media under state control is eerily similar to the very state socialist initiatives that FIDESZ has actively repudiated, declaring to build its legitimacy on its opposition to the overprotective state and aligning itself with the most cynical, bare-bones version of Reaganomics. Despite its ideology of anti-socialism, the government borrows selectively from the cultural forms of socialist media to reignite a sense of nationalistic bonding cultivated by János Kádár's regime of goulash socialism. Kádár's party government, however, at least preserved some of the original socialist ideals, even if in a watered-down version. It promoted programming that reached the widest possible audiences, particularly across class and geography, and decentralized broadcasting by launching the local radio and TV stations that FIDESZ is now eliminating.

Another important difference from the Kádár era is that public broadcasters, much like elsewhere in the postsocialist region, have slipped far behind the major commercial broadcasters in ratings and popularity – a far cry from the total national coverage their predecessors enjoyed during socialism. In 2011, M1 had a 7.9% audience share across the population overall, trailing by a large margin the two leading commercial broadcasters RTL KLUB (20.3%) and TV2 (18.6%). M2 came in 9<sup>th</sup> overall at 1.9% and Duna TV at 1.8%. Among the 18-49 demographic, M1 scored only a 3.8% of viewer ratings while M2 came in at a miniscule 1.2% and Duna TV at 15<sup>th</sup> place with 1.1%.<sup>32</sup> Public broadcasters operate on a terrain that is infinitely more dispersed and varied than that of the two government-controlled channels that had enjoyed a monopoly up to the mid-80s. As a result, they essentially operate like niche channels that entertain the government's right-leaning, older, mostly rural political base.

Popular music's capacity to call up depoliticized, affective memories that can be retooled to serve party politics has also been amply deployed on public television elsewhere in the region. In the former Yugoslavia, turbo-folk was instrumental in whipping up militaristic nationalism during the 1990s,<sup>33</sup> epitomized by the wedding of Serbian warlord Arkan to turbo-folk singer Cece in 1995 in a lavish media event.<sup>34</sup> Zala Volčič writes that national television stations in all the former republics have set out to address ethnically pure national families imagined as superior to the other post-Yugoslav states. As elsewhere, television works at the interfaces of official state nationalism and the commercial purposes of a "nostalgia industry." A number of Yugoslav-themed TV shows, pop music albums, and films have turned Yugo-nostalgia into mainstream entertainment. For example, the popular Serbian radio station Radio Nostalgia plays only the songs of the Yugoslav era.<sup>35</sup>

32 Csatormanézetség - 2011: Az 50 legnézettebb hazai TV adó. <http://sorozatwiki.hu/news.php?readmore=55921>, 17 May 2013

33 Zala Volčič, 'Yugo-Nostalgia: Cultural Memory and Media in the Former Yugoslavia,' *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 24, 1, 2007, p. 21-38.

34 Dina Iordanova, 'Balkan Wedding Revisited,' 1998. <http://www.cas.umn.edu/assets/pdf/WP981.PDF>, May 17 2013

35 Volčič

## 6 Socialist TV Commercials: A Contradiction In Terms

Besides music, the televisual genre that has most frequently catalysed the contradictory uses of nostalgic nationalism is commercials. Old socialist commercials have been some of the most dependable vehicles of popular nostalgia in the region. Contemporary commercials also often use nostalgic elements. Perhaps most jarring among these are the figures of totalitarian leaders. In the post-Yugoslav republics, Josip Broz Tito is alive and well as the hero of not just films and television shows but also TV ads for a variety of products. Volčič notes the irony that, as a socialist party leader, Tito embodied anti-capitalism and anti-commercialism.<sup>36</sup>

Even dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu has surfaced in commercials in Romania, where he and his wife were brutally executed by insurgents in the anti-communist revolution of 1989. A series of commercials featuring Ceaușescu now advertise cell phones and car tyres and advocate for the adoption of stray dogs in public service announcements. These ads use previously unreleased images of the dictator walking his dog or being flustered during a speech. These are instances that blend top-down history lessons with the work of popular memory. They punctuate contemporary continuities with the communist regime that are taboo in official narratives but prevalent in popular perceptions of history. No wonder this mixing has caused confusion in Romania: the fact that Ceaușescu's ghost appears in a humorous, commercial context is seen by some as trivializing the horror of the dictatorship. However, Diana Georgescu argues, such hybrid representations assist, rather than obstruct, coming to terms with the past. They provide a mode of popular counter-memory that may challenge what is congealing into a master narrative of dominant interpretations issued by politicians and intellectuals. These practices use Ceaușescu's figure as a release valve to start processing the paralyzing past and the humiliating present of globalization coupled with reactionary state control.<sup>37</sup>

The fact that commercials are favourite triggers of postsocialist nostalgia is an important indicator of television's potential contribution to research on history and memory. The key to the ads' appeal is that socialist advertising is an oxymoron. Socialist commercials always contain an element of awkwardness because they promoted products and services that had not competition in the absence of a real market. State-produced ads for the central state-owned bank, insurance company or supermarket thus encapsulate the absurdity of an era.

Polish socialist commercial for the state-produced bus AUTOSAN

Hungarian commercial for the department store Skala Coop

It is precisely the shared experience of this absurdity that guarantees the authenticity of remembering and mutual recognition among members of the nostalgic community. Neither official history and its opportunistic, nationalistic deployment on public service television, nor common notions of nostalgia imposed from the outside are able to capture the contradictions of this longing on their own. It is no coincidence that the most "authentic" manifestation of nostalgia is attached to a contradictory genre of a contradictory medium that has itself caused so much puzzlement and confusion among politicians and historians alike that it has been erased from legitimate consideration altogether. It is also little surprise that the nostalgic gathering around commercials takes place almost exclusively online, in the vast fan collections on YouTube and other file-sharing sites and discussion lists, or offline at nostalgia parties and in other casual settings.

Late socialist Yugoslav commercial for RADENSKA mineral water

Late socialist Yugoslav commercial for FRUTEK baby food

Late socialist Yugoslav commercial for EVA sardines

<sup>36</sup> Volčič

<sup>37</sup> Diana Georgescu, "Ceausescu Hasn't Died." Irony as Counter-memory in Post-Socialist Romania,' In Todorova and Gille, p. 154-166.

The postsocialist nostalgia that is triggered by TV commercials is a defiant longing for a bond specific to an elusive era – that of late socialism of the 1970s and 80s, a period of political and economic thaw in most countries. This period unravelled Cold War scripts of a stark opposition between communism and capitalism. Television was the chief medium and vehicle of this unravelling, where the softening and feminizing of socialism within popular culture first manifest itself – unlike in high culture, whose products had to sustain the illusion of dissidence in opposition to the regime. By implication, postsocialist nostalgia is a fairly narrow generational phenomenon, shared among those born in the 1960s and 70s. One hardly hears members of older generations wax nostalgic about the 1950s or earlier decades. Younger generations, who have no memories of socialism themselves, are also receptive to postsocialist nostalgia as an indirect, inherited sentiment but also as consumers of TV programs, films and products that use nostalgia as a vehicle of promotion. Nostalgia for late socialism is a popular and essential compensatory gesture to make up for the loss of a contradictory temporality. But it is also, and perhaps more importantly, a mode of continuity with an era that was *already nostalgic* for the unrealized transformative potential of real socialism. As Maya Nadkarni observes, the nostalgic consumption of the detritus of official state culture began before socialism ended.<sup>38</sup>

The . . . enthusiasm for consumer luxuries and weekend houses (as well as the second jobs necessary to acquire them) . . . meant that it was the regime's own policies that produced the modern consumer subjectivity that made possible the fantasies of Western consumption. . .<sup>39</sup>

The 1980s of late socialism had a suspended temporality, when everyday life was permeated by a sense of being stuck between a past of (longing for) heroic communism, forever out of reach, and a future without hope since no one expected socialism to fall. Alexei Yurchak talks about late socialism as a time of 'frozen present'.<sup>40</sup> Frozen present is the time of nostalgia. It is because late socialist culture itself lived in a nostalgic mode, at a certain ironic, knowing distance from what it was supposed to be according to the memories of the heroic 40s-50s and the remnants of socialist propaganda, that it has been so seamlessly and eagerly adopted by generations who never experienced socialism. It is a familiar, ironic mode of experiencing history vicariously. Late socialism introduced and prefigured an affect and epistemology that can only access the "authentic" through contradiction, ambivalence and self-reflective irony.

Late socialist commercials thus constitute a genre of continuity between late socialism and postsocialist capitalism. They represent an anchor in the sea of commercials that flooded the region after socialism officially ended. Their awkwardness and imperfection still offered a sliver of community belonging in the collective, ironic winks over the low-quality products that the commercials advertised and everyone used. Compared to the perfect veneer of shiny commercials and the terror of endless choices provided by global corporations on postsocialist TV, state socialism seemed like a navigable, manageable state of affairs.

Televsual nostalgia bears out Daphne Berdahl's claim that socialism continues to have an active social life.<sup>41</sup> Amy Holdsworth writes that television's current memory boom is an expression of present anxieties about history and memory in general, which have also profoundly informed television and television studies.<sup>42</sup> Research on postsocialist nostalgia has a special relevance for understanding these anxieties. Examining the role of television in relation to postsocialist nostalgia therefore holds out the promise to revise not just the reigning distinction between memory and history but also the relationship between European socialism and its pasts.

38 Nadkarni 197

39 Nadkarni 201

40 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 46.

41 Daphne Berdahl, 'Good Bye Lenin! Aufwiedersehen GDR: On the Social Life of Socialism,' in Todorova and Gille, p. 177-180.

42 Holdsworth, p. 138.

## Acknowledgements

I want to thank Alice Bardan, Kata Palyik, Aga Skrodzka, Zala Volčič and the anonymous reviewers for their help with this article.

## Biography

Anikó Imre is an Associate Professor in the School of Cinematic Arts of the University of Southern California. Her work revolves around global media, with a special interest in (post)socialist Europe. Her books include *Identity Games: Globalization and the Transformation of Media Cultures in the New Europe*; *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media*; *East European Cinemas*; *Blackwell Companion to Eastern European Cinemas*; and *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and After Socialism*.