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Article



A study in the history of meaning-making: Watching socialist television serials in the former Czechoslovakia

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to map out and analyse how the viewers of the communist-governed Czechoslovak television understood the propagandist television serials during the so-called normalization, the last two decades of communist party rule after the Prague Spring. It strives to show peculiarities of the research on television viewers' capabilities to remember the meanings and details of hermeneutic agency which took place in the past. The article argues that – in contrast to the mainstream historiography which claims full depoliticization of Czechoslovak people as a consequence of post-Prague Spring disillusionment – the uses of popular culture provided niches in which the political could be experienced. The role of reproductive memory in remembering the viewers' experience buried under the grand socio-political switchover is also illuminated and used to coin the concept of 'memory over dislocation'.

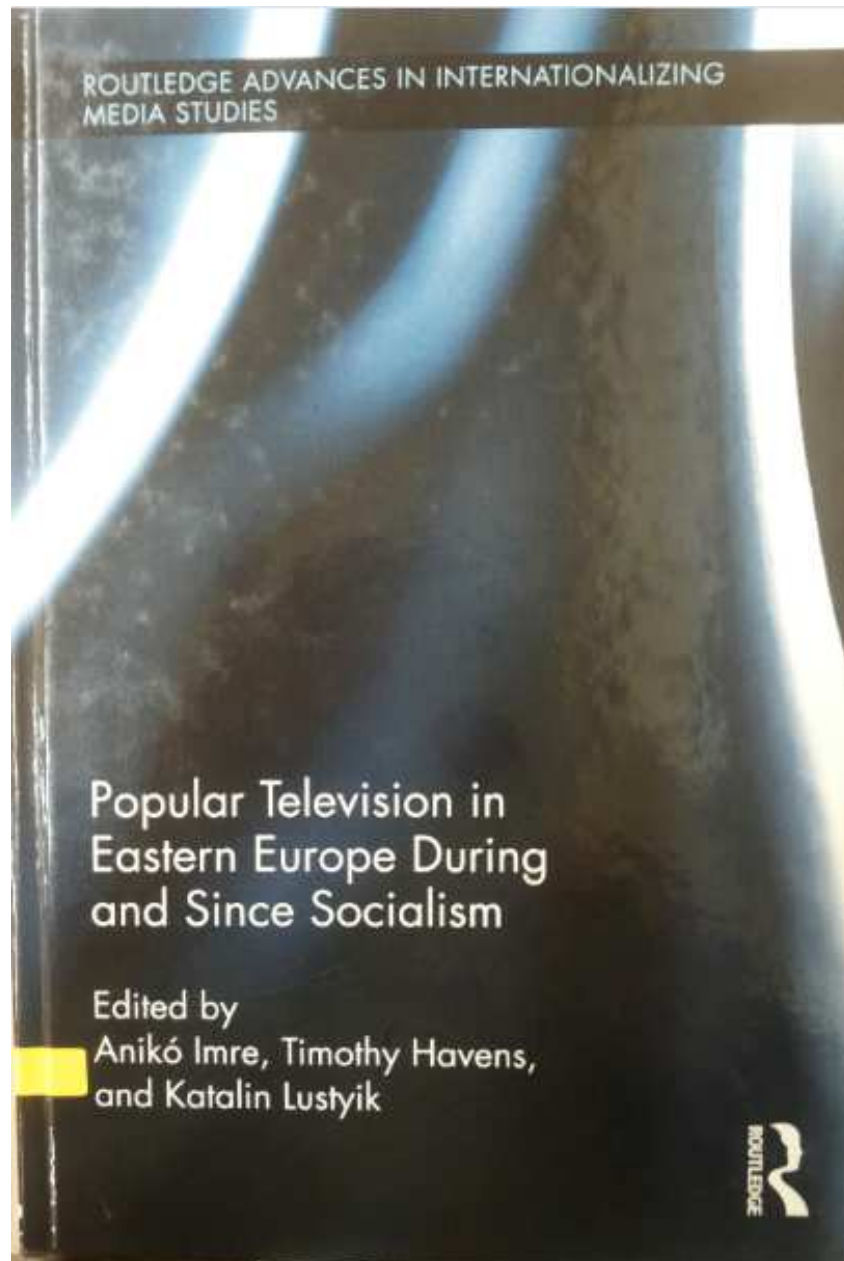
Keywords

Collective memory, Czechoslovak normalization, life-story research, popular culture, post-socialism, television serials

This article seeks to challenge a tacit assumption that instrumental and interpretive autonomy of media use can only be looked for in the democratic environment. It turns the time back to the 1970s and 1980s in state-socialist Czechoslovakia and strives to illuminate how the television viewers understood the socialist television serials, the loca-

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11 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

*Irena Carpentier Reifová, Kateřina
Gillárová and Radim Hladík*

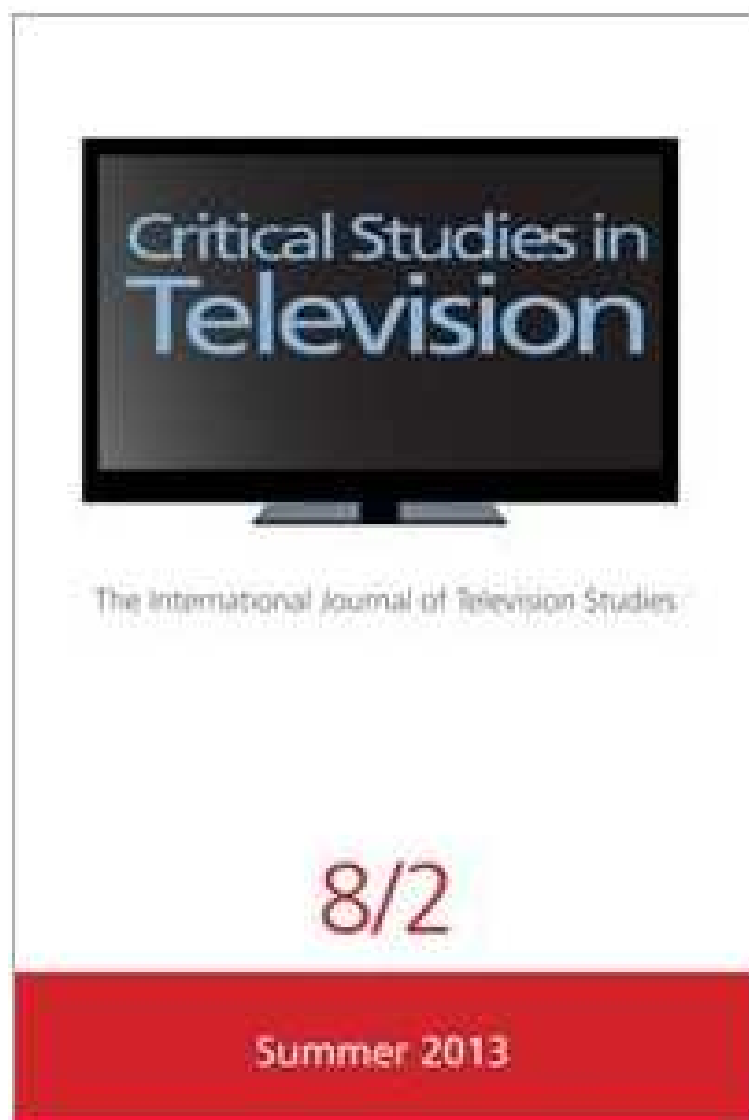
Popular television has some distinct privileges in representing the past. As Irwin-Zarecka asserts, it frames collective memory in at least two important ways: exposure, since “for many people, television offers the main, if not the only information they have about a great number of historical events”; and claims to historical accuracy, as “television presents us with reality-based drama, docudrama and document where the strength of writing, visuals, and faithfulness to detail all combine” (Irwin-Zarecka 1994, 155–156). These mnemonic capacities of television make it a worthwhile object of study in countries like the Czech Republic, which arguably still try to come to terms with their state socialist legacy.

For the analysis of how television programming intervenes in the formation of post-socialist identities, we are going to look at parallels between different forms of remembering the past. We do not strive to put forward any particular “genre of memory” (e.g., amnesia, nostalgia, displacement, collective guilt) nor any specific social enclave (former dissidents, intellectuals or alternative culture practitioners). Our main goal is to examine how memory (interrupted by the politics of a thick line after 1989) is secured by the “semiotic power of people” (Fiske 1987, 236) and how practices of reading popular culture are involved in this process. We are interested in the ways which ordinary people use to regain the sense of continuity by fostering different genres of memory and in the ways the mnemonic function of popular television can stimulate this process.

POST-SOCIALISM AND MEMORY STUDIES

As the prefix “post” suggests, state socialism still survives in Central and Eastern Europe, at least to the extent that we continue to designate it as a post-socialist space. The region remains alive in personal and collective,

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Democracy and (De)mythologizing Socialist

Commodification and Reclaiming the Past

Denisa Kojová

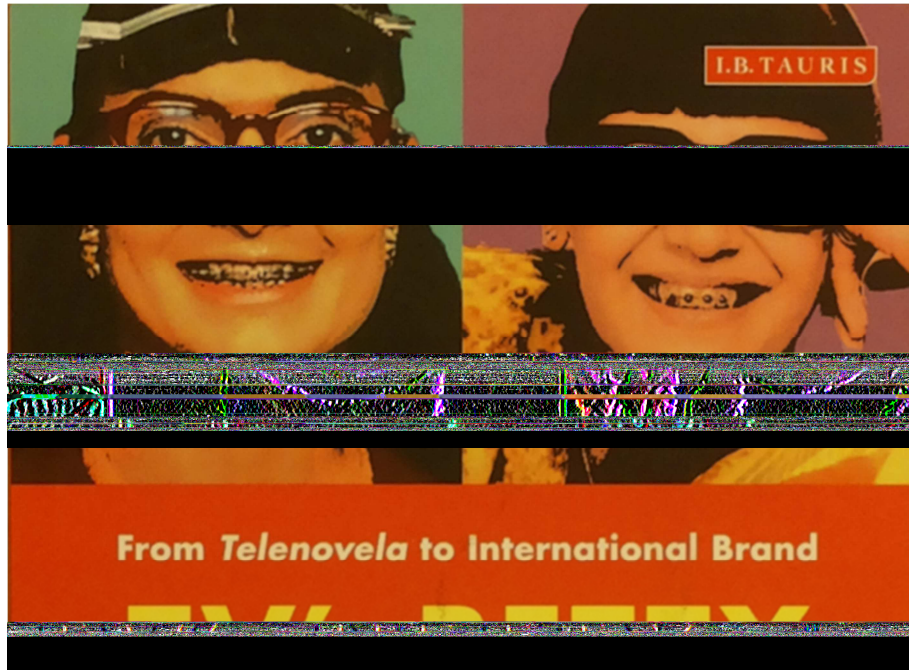
When propagandist TV serials from the socialist era reran on Czech television in the late 1990s and early noughties, something unusual happened. A genre happily consigned to oblivion when democracy replaced totalitarianism was resurrected on television as well as DVD. Both public and private broadcasters incorporated socialist TV serials into their schedules, as millions tuned in to watch dramas depicting an allegedly idyllic society. Viewers, in turn, responded with ambivalence – oscillating between affection and disgust. Broadcasters scheduled communist television-produced TV serials more than 200 times after 1989, some reran in primetime with significant ratings of around two million viewers.

Reasons for resuscitating the socialist TV serials are varied. The ability of television to mediate between past and present is central, as recently highlighted by the fruitful encounters between television studies and memory studies.¹ Economics is another factor, as reruns reduce programming costs. TV serial fiction is not the only type of content to which rerun practices apply; repeated screenings are also an important scheduling strategy for Czech Television. In 2006, for example, 57 per cent of content on Czech Television comprised of reruns, increasing to 60

watching of socialist TV serials is post-socialist nostalgia. Post-socialist nostalgia adopts a postmodern attitude and fills it with peculiar content and practices. The return of the communist-produced TV serials can be interpreted as a backlash to the years immediately following the political transition in 1989, a period of suppressing the discredited totalitarian past and a thick dividing line profoundly shaped the Czech public sphere.

At the end of the 1990s, scholars and critical thinkers diagnosed a nostalgic structure of feeling being witnessed across the entire former Soviet bloc: in cinema, German culture started its 'Ostalgie' rendezvous with pre-unification

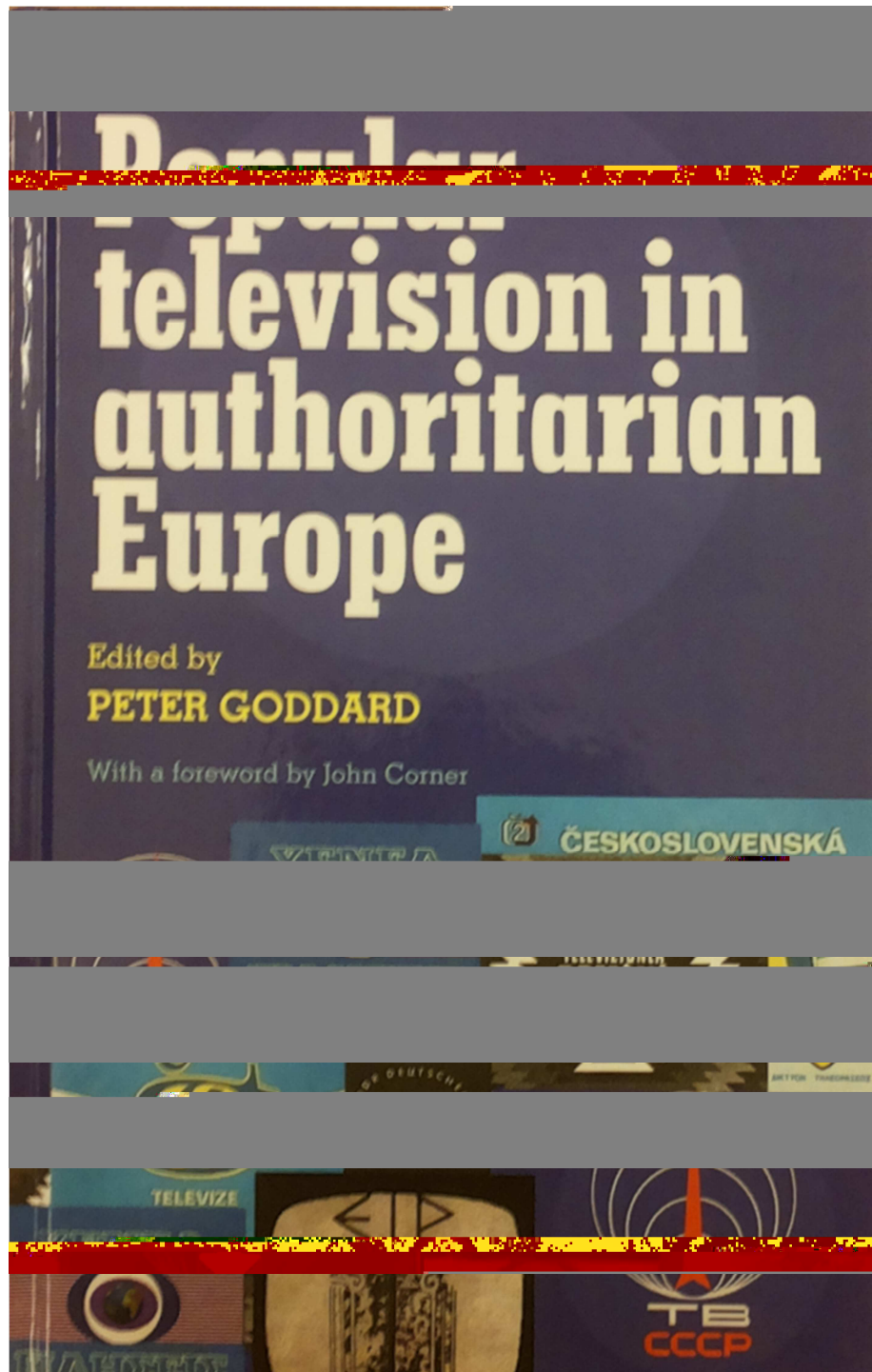
P ÍLOHA a



Czech *Ugly Katka*: Global Homogenization and Local Invention

Irena Carpentier Reifová and Zdeněk Sloboda

Since the 1990s, the Czech Republic has gone through a process of transformation. The country has advanced from an authoritarian regime to a liberal economy, where the post-socialist condition remains an influential discourse affecting how meanings are generated and fixed (Jakubowicz and Sukosd 2008). Implementation of the Columbian format of *Yo soy Betty, la fea* (*I Am Betty, the Ugly One* [RCN, 1999–2001]), which was adapted into a 73-episode serialization entitled *Ošklivka Katka* (*Ugly Katka* [TV Prima, 2008]), is a good example of how the combination of a social-realistic leitmotif with elements of fairytale and dramedy offers an opportunity to negotiate sensitive meanings concerning capitalism in a post-socialist world. In addition, it allows us to explore the dark side of the system, such as polarization and social difference, which Eastern European, neoliberal hegemonies present as the only viable and desirable social project. The basic assumption is that while Katka Bertoldová's (played by Kateřina Janečková) may come from a domestic world that appears ugly, the people living within it actually act beautifully, whereas her work environment is externally beautiful but is populated with people acting in ugly ways. The challenging intersections of some of the most effective 'engines' of this format,¹ as well as the issues related to a post-socialist agenda, motivate us to focus on oppositions like work/unemployment, social inequality/mobility, small private business/large



6 Between politics and soap:
The articulation of ideology and
melodrama in Czechoslovak communist
television serials, 1975–89¹

*Irena Carpentier Reifová, Petr Bednařík and
Šimon Dominik*

During the period of Czechoslovak normalisation² (1969–89), an in