

Watching socialist television serials in the 70s and 80s in the former Czechoslovakia: A study in the history of meaning-making¹

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Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to map out and analyze how the viewers of the communist-governed Czechoslovak television understood the propagandist television serials during so-called “normalization”, the last two decades of the 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 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: popular culture, television serials, Czechoslovak normalization, life-story research, collective memory, post-socialism

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1 Introduction

This chapter 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 Czechoslovak legendary television of the period. Its goal is to map out the meaning-making processes stimulated by television programmes that packaged ideological credos of the Communist Party as popular television narratives. What is even more important, though, is to show that these programmes sensitized viewers' meaning-making potential, and that the spectators did not simply swallow the propagandist hook without any modification or re-appropriation.

This is not an attempt to pulverize or relativize the goals and methods of the Communist Party's propaganda. The chapter rather argues that production and reception were "linked but distinctive moments" (Hall, 1980, p. 107) even in the circuits of culture within undemocratic society in Communist Party governed Czechoslovakia.

The existing conceptual apparatus of audience studies derives predominantly from the research that was done on media audiences in democratic, capitalist circumstances. Unregimented, liberal media culture seems to be a primary condition for meaningful enquiry into the audiences as it is exactly political freedom and market operations which allow scholars to assess the audiences either as citizens or as consumers, the two most examined subject positions in contemporary audience studies (Dahlgren/Sparks, 1991; Blumler/Gurevitch, 1995). Nonetheless, the audiences in undemocratic conditions were never made part of this narrative.

2 Methodological considerations: History, memory and meanings

Methodologically speaking, this research is a study in the history of meaning making processes. It has two main points of departure. Firstly, it proposes that totalitarian popular culture was used in a hermeneutically prolific way, and seeks to examine political readings of the socialist serials by the television audiences of the period. Secondly, it differentiates between actual historical meaning making processes and the retrospective reconstruction of these processes. It assumes that viewers' memory of how they understood propagandist television in the socialist past is massively affected by the drive to re-evaluate the past in post-socialist collective memory.

The research is grounded in analyzing respondents' memories of watching the socialist serials collected by the focus group interviews. The sample was composed of 40 narrators in seven focus groups (one in-depth interview with a specific respondent was also done). The selection of narrators was controlled for age, active viewing of the socialist serials during so-called "normalization" and declared attitude to the state-socialist system in Czechoslovakia. The narrators in the study were born in 1955 or earlier; only people who were at least 20 years old in 1975, when the first propagandist television serial was aired, were selected. The narrators were grouped according to their attitude towards the communist system into six groups with no specific attitude and one group with an oppositional attitude. Interviewing was done in a semi-structured fashion according to a prepared list of topics. The interviews took place during 2012 in the central part of the Czech Republic (including Prague) and in Brno. The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes each, and video samples taken from the three socialist serials were used as artifacts and incentives. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed. 'Normalization' is the name commonly given to the period between 1969-89 in Czechoslovakia, following the curtailment of reforms stemming from the 1968 political liberalization movement, which would become known as the 'Prague Spring', and the subsequent restoration of totalitarianism. It was characterized by the restoration of the Communist Party rule prevailing before the reform period led by Alexander Dubček.

Normalization, which brought about the re-establishment of an unadulterated totalitarian regime, is mostly studied in terms of specifying the power of the state socialist structures. Human agency is overlooked as a quality which naturally atrophied under the pressure of the tyrannizing structures. Looking for the indices of autonomous hermeneutic agency within the conditions of normalization brings a new stimulus into academic writing on non-democratic audiences, which has been for a long time preoccupied with the power of structures and indoctrinating effects of propaganda (Otáhal, 1994; Fidelius, 1998; Kabele/Hájek, 2008; Jareš et al., 2012).

3 Memory over dislocation

The overall methodology of this research could be defined as the sociology of the past based on life-story research. It analyzes the extracts of life-stories that respondents produced when they were invited to talk about memories of their watching political scenes in the socialist serials.

The most contested aspect of the studies grounded in life-story methodology is the nature of memory work. This type of research has been notoriously criticized for working with something as biased and unreliable as memory although memory studies scholars tend to anticipate potential criticism

themselves. Alistair Thomson enlists multifarious doubts about memory as a data-mining tool. According to Thomson, memory deteriorates in old age, gets affected by nostalgia or influenced by the narrator's and interviewer's personalities – and above all – it is replaced by reconfigured versions of the collective or retrospective memory (Thomson, 2011, p. 79). Jerome Bourdon in his account of memory as “the double agent” also stresses that “memory is reconstructive; it constantly re-elaborates the past” (Bourdon, 2011, p. 63).

Distortions and reconstitutions of memory are by and large accepted as indisputable facets of memory work which apply to all remembering subjects in all circumstances. Nonetheless, this research still requires a more nuanced perspective which allows us to understand that the intensity of reconstructive tendency is crucially connected to dis/continuity of memory. The discontinued memory which has to handle a transformative rupture, dividing the life course into incompatible parts, is necessarily even more reconstructive, and certainly reconstructs the past in a specific way. Such a memory can be defined as a memory over dislocation. It is exactly this type of memory which is dealt with in this research. The past of which narrators talked is separated from the present by the political and social switchover in 1989 – in other words by “dislocation”. Jakob Torfing defines it as a total fracture of all familiar social dimensions, as “a destabilization of a discourse that results from the emergence of events which cannot be domesticated, symbolized or integrated within the discourse in question” (1999, p. 301). Memory is even more fragile and agile if it stretches over dislocation and such specificity has to be taken into account in the phase of interpretations.

4 Qualitative analysis of focus group interviews

The main goal of the research was to find out how the viewers reflected on the socialist serials in the period of normalization, and whether they used these politically engaged narratives to connect to the themes of public relevance. Did this genre stimulate viewers (who were members of a generally de-politicized population) to sink deeper into the surrounding political realities and give precision to their political opinions?

4.1 *Cognitive reactions*

In the memories of the narrators, watching socialist serials was fully deprived of any cognitive processing. Watching these serials is remembered as a thing that occurred automatically, without reflection, as an element of an everyday routine. To watch or not to watch was not the dilemma for the majority of the

narrators; they watched the serials automatically, but with minimum intellectual involvement. Josef's account is a good example of this prevailing reaction: "I wasn't thinking while watching the serials because it simply didn't interest me. It is like having something else in your head. I paid no attention to the scenes from political meetings where the Bolsheviks decided that this cow has to give more milk".

The two main arguments that narrators used to explain their cognitive absenteeism in watching the serials referred to the sociopolitical background. The first one can be labeled "political anaesthesia". The narrators revealed that staying tuned into the flow of the regime's persuasive communication was difficult because it thoroughly penetrated all social communication. The result was lowered capacity (not speaking about desire) to perceive the messages, incapability to discern separate arguments within the surfeit of propaganda and general insensibility towards the political discourse.

The second reason mentioned was the feeling of having no control over things, a sense of powerlessness. Incogitant viewing was connected to the awareness that a thoughtful focus on the political sequences would not make any difference; creating opinions was useless activity as there was no "market" for people's opinions. This subcategory can be framed as "deficit of agency". Mila described feelings of powerlessness when she said: "It was better to watch it this way, better than letting it eat you, better than feeling sad and hurt. Because ... we could not do anything about it, it was the way it was".

Some, mainly female, narrators mentioned their life stage as a reason for withdrawal from reflecting on political issues in the serials and in the society. They referred to their focus on starting families and bringing up children who were small early in the normalization period. (Family was the most important locus within normalization privatism [Havelková, 1993]. The early years of normalization saw a remarkable baby-boom, which was a demographic sign of a retreat into the private sphere. The total fertility rate in 1974 was the highest in the post-war years.)

The only departure from the general denial of cognitive involvement was the use of propagandist sequences in the serials as analytical material. Some narrators recalled that they watched the serials as a way of "studying the enemy", i.e. the Communist Party ruling establishment. They tried to do their own private analysis of propagandist techniques and protect their notion of the divide between reality and its ideologically distorted version. Pavel was one of those who revealed purposeful uses of cognitive functions: "I watched, as I say, only for study purposes. But some of them were simply too repulsive even as a study material". Jan gave a more detailed account of the same motivation: "Talking about *The Thirty Adventures of Major Zeman*, I was interested to find out how they shape the reality, how they present it to the audiences. Before

1968, my dad was a head of the psychology department at the university and I wanted to figure out how these people think. So I watched it carefully and learned a lot about the world we lived in.”

All narrators who mentioned study reasons for some intellectual involvement in watching the serials had an oppositional attitude towards the political regime, and one was a member of the dissident circles.

4.2 *Non-cognitive reactions*

The narrators gave a list of other forms of viewing practices in relation to the socialist serials. However, they did not classify these practices as intellectual activities, nor agreed with this interpretation when it was offered to them in the fashion of a “devil’s advocate question” (Michiello et. al., 1990, p. 124). Therefore these reactions, which the narrators excluded from cognitive reflection, were grouped together within the category “non-cognitive reactions”.

The narrators fluently revealed **emotions** which they felt as a result of watching the socialist serials. They were predominantly sadness, irritation and hatred. Václav responded to this topic: “Watching it was suffering, a bit, sometimes... The piece about collectivization of the lands, I do not remember the title; it was difficult for those who lived in the countryside.”

The negative emotions which the serials raised had different intensities, from mild annoyance to open hatred. The feelings of open hatred (which were even translated into aggressive behaviour in one case) were, as well as “studying the enemy” in the category “cognitive reactions”, typical for the viewers with oppositional attitude. Mikuláš provided an intense example of hatred: “I played in the band. Once we were at some festival and we met Kaiser and Lábus there, the two actors who played in *Thirty Adventures of Major Zeman*, in the episode about hijacking the plane. I felt real hatred to these actors so I came down from the stage, came near and gave them a kick. All the guys then did the same thing, it was crowded and we were stealthily kicking their asses and shins.”

As the serials unreeled, people used to talk about the newly broadcast episodes in their conversations. Talking about new episodes of the serials was one of general everyday routines applied throughout various social groups and environments. Conversations related to the serials occurred in family circles or at work. Some narrators confirmed that talking about the episode broadcast the previous evening was the first thing they did after they arrived at work. Narrators who worked as manual workers reported less self-censorship in discussing the political sequences of the serials, as compared to the narrators who worked in administration. Antonín, who was a member of the communist parliament during normalization, remembered that his colleagues gave him the nickname

Plateník after the main character of the regional Communist Party Secretary from the serial *The District in the North*. He said: “The guys from the factory used to give me a hard time. When I came in the morning, they gathered around me and snapped at me: What a silly thing your comrades did in the last episode again ... But I almost looked forward to these moments.”

Suppression of the political sequences and concentration on the newest developments in the romantic parts of the plots was, however, a much more obvious practice. It was summarized by Anna: “It was normal gossiping. One came to work and the debate started: what about the main heroine last evening and what about him, what kind of bollocks somebody said, if she looked pretty or impossible, and so on...”

Very often the narrators mentioned **laughter** as their reaction to propagandist sequences in the serials. They described the laughter as ironic and in some cases laughter was combined with ironic comments to the television. (Laughter here overlaps with conversations – ironic talking back to the television is the intersection of the two practices.) Milada contributed to this issue: “It was malicious, ironic laughter. Sometimes my husband added a comment to the plot, like: Now you really explained it, thank you. It was a way of diminishing the tension.”

Laughter was either a compensatory or surrogate practice helping the viewers to eliminate tension or replace a less desirable alternative. The narrators noted that laughing helped them avoid becoming angry. Ironic laughter associated with watching the socialist serials is, nonetheless, different from the ironic viewing which was diagnosed by Ien Ang (1985) in the case of Dallas audiences. In the case of viewers of the socialist serials, laughter was an emergency practice which they did not enjoy.

A couple of times narrators rehearsed explicitly oppositional practices (a protestant priest who said he preached against the propagandist serials in the church) or practices of **excorporation** defined by John Fiske as the “process by which the powerless steal elements of the dominant culture and use them in their own, often oppositional or subversive, interests” (Fiske, 1987, p. 315). Both examples of excorporation were inspired by watching *The Woman Behind the Counter*. Olga said that the next morning after the first episode was aired she and the group of her friends went to their local supermarket, asked for a Customers’ Book and (in a joking manner) wrote a written complaint saying that this supermarket should be supplied as well as the one on television. Marie remembered that the exterior of the television supermarket was located at Praha Smíchov, and on the way back from a bar she and her friends banged on the door and yelled: “Let us in, here you have everything and other places have empty shelves”.

4.3 Unthinkable thinking

When asked about forms and intensities of reflection on the political parts of the serials, the first choice of answer in the absolute majority of cases was: “But we did not think about it back then”. The denial of any cognitive involvement was the red thread unreeling throughout the research. It emerged soon that it is mainly the signifier “thinking” which functions to stop further musing.

The dichotomy of cognitive vs. non-cognitive reactions became the central categorical pair. Cognitive reactions encompassed either cognitive denial or – solely in the case of narrators who had an oppositional attitude to the communist establishment – employment of cognitive functions to study the socialist serials as a source of knowledge of the methods the regime used to communicate with its citizens. The category of “non-cognitive reactions” encompassed all other reactions the narrators revealed after they had refused cognitive processing of the political scenes in the serials. They retrieved their affections (mostly negative); conversational references to the serials within the everyday situations; moments of bitter, ironical laughter and scattered behavioral reactions in *carnavalesque* style.

It is absolutely indispensable that the interpretation of the results takes into account potential traps and pitfalls of narrators’ remembering of the socialist past, specificities of remembering the past stored behind the socio-political rupture and supposable reconstitution of the memories under this influence. As was explained earlier, memory is always reconstructive – it mediates over time and suffers from all distortions that any mediation involves (and a few of its own). Nonetheless, in this research we want to narrow our attention to the modifications brought about by the dislocatory impact of socio-political change in 1989. From this perspective, signs of dislocation-affected reconstruction of memory accumulated mainly around the category of cognitive denial. These signs – contradictions in storytelling and uses of ahistorical language – appeared mostly when the narrators talked of their cognitive disengagement.

Contradictions refer to discrepancies in narrators’ accounts of their reasons for abandoning cognitive response as a possible reaction to the socialist serials. They mentioned loss of sensitivity to the political rhetoric caused by surfeit of clichés in the public space (labeled as political anaesthesia), and loss of motivation to develop opinions caused by their detachment from any decision-making acts (labeled as agency deficit) as the main reasons. Simultaneously narrators easily admitted that they joked and talked about the serials and laughed at them. In other words, they retrieved activities (labeled as non-cognitive reactions), which necessarily did involve some level of cognitive processing as well, but narrators would not mention them when asked about cognitive processing directly. Emotions, too, were totally detached from any cognitive accompaniment in the narrators’ accounts. Nonetheless, Liesbet

Van Zoonen collected evidence based on neurosciences' theory of affective intelligence, proving that emotionality is inseparable from rationality (2005, p. 65).

Another sign of narrators replacing memory with its adjusted counterpart affected by dislocation was a use of ahistorical language, i.e. the language containing lexical units which were not part of standard vocabulary in the past they were talking about. These are the examples of the symptomatic language: "it was a regular call for collaboration" (Mikuláš), "the ideology was everywhere" (Anna), "I was an anti-communist rebel, you know" (Svát'a), "of course, the serials were conformist to the regime" (Josef), "I was kind of sorry when I saw people who were enthusiastic about the regime" (Pavel). When giving reasons for their political lethargy, the narrators used vocabulary that showed the analytical distance from the totalitarian conditions which they simply did not have when it was in a full swing. The language indicated they had been revealing what they think now, not how they experienced the reasons for withdrawal from political thinking in the days of normalization. Dana Gabl'asová in her research on linguistic attributes of life-story interviews covering normalization arrived at the same experience and recorded one of her narrators confirming this theory: "Communist regime, ... it is not the way we put it back then" (Gabl'asová, 2009, p. 97).

4 Conclusion

The phenomenon of cognitive denial is the principal finding of this research. Nonetheless, it is even more important to ask when it was that the denial occurred. It is at this point where we can relate the findings to the interpretation of memory operations in the countries of Eastern Europe. There are signs that dislocation-affected memory intruded on the way that the narrators rendered their cognitive relations to the serials more than other subcategories. It is likely that the socialist serials received more cognitive attention during their screenings in normalization than the narrators confessed to in the present moment. The idea that the socialist popular culture might ever have been worthy of thought seems to be utterly unthinkable in the present day. The category of cognitive denial is very likely to be shaped by a retrospective re-evaluation of the past. This memory figure may follow from retrospective negative judgement of the political situation of the time and a sort of "retrospective shame". In case of denying cognitive involvement in the socialist serials, narrators substitute parts of their memory with a reconfiguration compliant to the new neoliberal hegemony, which takes reprobation of the socialist past as one of its defining characteristics.

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Biography

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