Past, future and change: Contemporary analysis of evolving media scapes

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Uncertain Guilt: How the Czech Television Serial Vyprávěj Stirred Up Viewers' Memories of Socialism

Irena Reifová, 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 properties make television a worthwhile object of study in countries like the Czech Republic, which arguably are still trying to come to terms with their state socialist legacy.

We intend to look at how television programming intervenes in the formation of post-socialist memory. 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 the practices of reading popular culture are involved in this process. We are interested in the ways in which ordinary people attempt to regain a sense of continuity by fostering different genres of memory, and in how the mnemonic function of popular television can stimulate this process.

1. 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. It remains alive in personal and collective, private and public, dominant and marginalised narratives of the past. The continuing relevance of the past in the present constitutes the essence of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992) that transforms landscapes and mediascapes

into countless places of memory (Nora, 1989). Cultural and collective memory ensure, for better or worse, that the new identities emerging from the turmoil of fundamental socio-political transformations not only adhere to novel practices and institutions but also draw on the imagery of the past.

The burgeoning discipline of memory studies has, to a considerable extent, managed to empower narratives of the state socialist past that lack the sanction of scholarly historiography and yet remain formative of both social bonds and animosities among social groups and nations. So far, however, memory studies have not arrived at a consensus account of the principles of commemoration, remembering and forgetting that help post-socialist Europe make sense of the state-socialist experience. As the coiner of the term 'collective memory', Maurice Halbwachs (Halbwachs, 1992), predicted, the very multiplicity of groups in which individual members of society participate seems to preclude a unitary formation of memory.

Some post-socialist discourses mediating between the past and the present, of which popular culture genres constitute a considerable part, were demarcated and explicated by cultural scholars as post-socialist nostalgia (Enns, 2007; Boyer, 2006; Volčič, 2007; Reifová, 2009). These nostalgic discourses usually refer to the socialist past either directly (better to say indexically), by recycling individual tokens of an authentic socialist culture, or indirectly (symbolically), by producing new representations of the past.[1] To put it simply, nostalgic discourses either *present* the preserved parts of the past (e.g. pop singers or actors who became popular in socialist times as symbols of the era) or *represent* 'them' (e.g. contemporary feature films which look back at the socialist period) (Dominková 2008).

1 By tokens of an authentic socialist culture we mean material objects or immaterial images that were produced or used in the past and have been preserved through to the present day, not only in official archives and museums, but also through informal ways of storage in people's households etc. This can be clothing, furniture, do-it-yourself objects or television shows produced before 1989. Indexical signs of the past rarely stand in isolation; they are usually parts of bigger wholes which are symbolic in nature. It could be a particular authentic object preserved from the past and used as a prop in the film. Typical examples include the sort of original labels of cans, bottles and other groceries used in the film *Goodbye, Lenin!* (Germany 2003). 'The appeal of the index' in creating an effect of historicity in visual representation is emphasised by Philip Rosen (2001, 127). He draws a distinction between 'preservationist' and 'restorationist' positions, where the first one encompasses attempts to show the past through authentic, unmodified objects (in spite of their natural wear and imperfections), while the second one strives to aestheticise them by renovation (Rosen 2001, 52).

Nostalgia, "*a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed, […] a sentiment of loss and displacement*" (Boym 2001, xiii), has over the course of modernity acquired a temporal as well as a spatial sense. It is now considered to be one of the threatening emotions of post-modern Western life and has often been theorized as such. Fredric Jameson, for instance, sees 'nostalgia films' as emblematic of the period of late capitalism, which erodes a sense of history: "*The nostalgia film was never a matter of some old-fashioned 'representation' of historical content, but instead approached the 'past' through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image.*" (Jameson, 1991: 19) Linda Hutcheon (1998), however, suggests post-modern irony as an antidote to the arresting effects of nostalgia.

Post-socialist nostalgia cannot be fully subsumed into postmodern nostalgia as it is experienced in the West. Although post-socialist nostalgia started to grow in an environment influenced by the convergence of post-socialism and postmodernism, it also resonates with a modernist vision of history, of which state socialism was probably the last big project (Ray, 1997). The specificity of post-socialist nostalgia stems from the fact that it strives for an integration of memory divided by the social rupture in 1989 (more precisely, futile but compulsive attempts to attain integration), in the sense of including the 'forbidden' past in a larger historical continuity. Post-socialist nostalgia is a memory-compensating nostalgia; it helps to restore the memory that disintegrated during the break between the socialist and neoliberal capitalist systems. The official, dominant discourses of economics and politics in the 1990s, initiated by the state authorities, political representatives or the judiciary, were firmly grounded in the logics of disjunction, a divorce with the socialist past. Most social subsystems were built anew to be totally different from the past, such as privatisation in the economic sphere or lustration within the cadres of the elite. The past was defined as something that should be replaced with a better present—and, if not fully erased, then only because the capacity to remember old faults increases the odds that they will not be repeated in the future. The past was simply defined by the dominant discourses as a loose end, which should have stayed loose, not as an object to which society should reconnect. The logics of disjunction became hegemonic in the early transformational years of the 1990s. Michael D. Kennedy argues that the idea of a profound historical rupture lies at the core of 'transition culture.' With regards to its treatment of the past, he remarks: "*Transition's tradition tends to draw more on capitalist experience from across the world than it does on any nation's socialist past. Socialism is something to be escaped, repressed, and destroyed*" (Kennedy, 2002: 13). The societal turnover from state socialism to

capitalism settled the conditions for a new anti-hegemonic struggle—one that is about gaining less restricted access to the past; about nurturing a collective memory which would embrace a broader repertoire than just an uncompromising denouncement of the past. That is why we think that the first attempts to compensate for displaced memory took place in the demi-monde of popular culture, below the radar of transition's proponents, and not in more highly valued elite cultural areas. Popular culture remains one of the principal sites where people can experience (nostalgic) links to the socialist past without having to face public reproach.

2. POST-SOCIALIST MEMORY AND CULTURAL TRAUMA

Apart from nostalgia, the concept that many other scholars find fruitful in explaining how post-socialist societies relate to their own pasts is that of cultural trauma—in spite of its bad reputation as a culturalist buzzword. According to Jeffrey Alexander,

> *cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways* (Alexander, 2004: 1).

Many sceptical queries have appeared in connection with this definition. Is trauma an event or rather the way it is remembered? (Eyerman, 2004: 62; Caruth, 1995: 4). Can trauma be cultural at all? Can it be collective in the sense of having a new quality that goes beyond a summary of individual traumas? (Joas, 2005: 372). Should non-violent events also be included in this category? (Kansteiner, 2004: 206). And then there is a group of thinkers who feel that taking the concept of trauma not only beyond the borders of medicine and psychoanalysis, where it originated, but also largely beyond the discourse on the Holocaust, is in itself sacrilegious and results in inflation of the concept's value.

While working with the concept of cultural trauma, it is important to stay away from simplifications, such as confusing cultural trauma with *"an aggregate of individual traumata"* (Carpentier, 2007: 251, see also Kansteiner, 2004: 209). It is clear that cultural trauma is not a summary of disconnected, personal reminiscences about approximately the same period. It must have an added quality of collectivity—shared clusters of meanings associated with the particular traumatising event. But it should also be said that symptoms of cultural trauma are only accessible via individual

stories and personal voices. The memories of individual survivors are an inevitable source of data, which of course must be further selected and processed. General demonisation of all uses of the personal in cultural trauma research thus makes little sense.

3. Television as a mnemonic medium

In order to explore the adequacy of concepts of nostalgia and cultural trauma in the context of representations of the state-socialist past in post-socialist popular culture, we carried out a study of a successful retrospective television programme. The guiding principle of the analysis was not to search for one-way media effects, but instead to focus on the viewers' use of media content in order to make meaning of the past. For this purpose, we examined how the retrospective television serial *Vyprávěj* (*Tell Me How It Was*; Czech Television, 2009–10) facilitates recollection and thinking about the socialist past. The research took the form of focus groups in which the viewers talked about their use of *Vyprávěj* as a mnemonic device that helped them to deal with the gulf between the socialist past and the capitalist present.

Vyprávěj is a hybrid comedy-docudrama serial. It presents the story of an ordinary family whose fictive everyday life is intertwined with real political events and their consequences. The show was produced by the public broadcaster Česká televize (Czech Television) as a programme commemorating the 20th anniversary of the fall of the state socialist regime in 1989. The narrative is packaged into four seasons. The first two seasons (covering the periods 1964–75 and 1975–85) have already aired, while the seasons covering the periods 1985–95 and 1995–2005 are forthcoming.[2] Among the serial's defining characteristics are the shifts between the enacted plot and the documentary parts and the heavy dependence of its visual aspect on pedantic faithfulness to the period's lifestyle. The average ratings of the serial per episode in 2009 were 1.3 million viewers. This is an above-average result even in primetime, and qualifies *Vyprávěj* as a great favourite with viewers.[3] It was extremely popular with female viewers (women accounted for up to two-thirds of the audience) and also

2 The first season aired from to August 31, 2009 to February 22, 2010 and had 26 episodes. The second season aired from September 9, 2010 to December 17, 2010 and had 16 episodes.

3 The average share of the serial *Vyprávěj* was 32.38% of viewers. In 2010 CT1 (the channel which aired the show) had 18.74% of viewers as the total average share in primetime (Source: http://www.ato.cz/vysledky/rocni-data/share/15).

achieved good results with younger audiences in the age segment 25–34.

The audience research took place in May 2010 in Prague, the Czech Republic. We organised eight focus groups formed from viewers who had independently written to Czech Television about the serial. The population of the study thus consists of respondents who cared to voice their appreciation of the serial, complaints regarding supposed inaccuracies, questions, etc, to The Audience Centre of Czech Television. At our request, the centre sent an email to addresses in its database describing the subject of our research and proposing participation in the qualitative audience survey.
The final sample thus represented active viewers, fans who apparently like to share their opinion with the producers as well as with scholars. There were 42 respondents in total, of whom 23 were female and 19 male. The groups were controlled for age and organised into two clusters: the first one consisted of young people who do not have any personal adult experience of socialism; the second included participants who have direct personal experience of socialist everyday life; and two of the groups were mixed with regards to the age of the respondents.

4. INDICES OF TRAUMATISED MEMORY

4.1. REGAINING CONTINUITY

A considerable proportion of the respondents' comments reflected an experience of cultural trauma. This category encompasses comments which relate to new social insecurities brought about by capitalist society, but mainly to disruption of biographical/institutional continuity (dislocation) and feelings of embarrassment/stress about life in totalitarian socialism. The most relevant comments were those which disentangled the coping strategies people use to reconcile themselves with the embarrassing or unsettling flashbacks and incorporated these recollections back into memory.

The respondents hinted at three separate reasons for keeping the collective memory active in the context of overcoming the rupture between present-day reality and the socialist past. They can be summarised as: 1) preventive continuity, 2) historiographic continuity, 3) everyday continuity. Preventive continuity is the least controversial form of the memory-compensating approach and, as such, has been part of the post-socialist mentality since the beginning of the 1990s. It recognises the relevance of uninterrupted memory to preventing the return of totalitarian socialism.

MFG1: "*To me, it is really important that these days should not come back, I mean the communists who ruled here…"*

Preventive continuity is close to historiographic continuity, although the latter refrains from making moral judgments and objectifies the period of socialism as an inseparable stage of history.

MFG4: "*It is important for the young generation because it is becoming part of history. So they should know, because it is a piece of our history."*

The most refined and nuanced meanings were to be found in the respondents' comments about the continuity of everyday life. They felt that the socio-political rupture between the past and the present had been overly generalised, so much so that it also affected the integrity of everyday life. The respondents indicated a two-way nexus between seemingly detached periods in the past and the present in the sphere of the everyday: in some respects, the past was not so different from the present, and in others the present is even permeated with the past. Very often, respondents voiced the opinion that everyday actors in totalitarian socialism took their living conditions for granted as a given social environment, very much as people today understand their present-day social realities.

MFG4: "*The last 20 years have brought enough information about all the bad things that happened. To be fair, it should also be said that people were living their normal lives in those days too. Brutality, prosecution, penalisation, these things impacted on one part of the population. The majority of the people tried to lead normal lives even in those days. Under communism, we did not live in the trees; marching under the red flags wasn't our daily bread. Normal human affairs were also on the agenda, such as television shows."*

MFG5: "*I was happy to be a pioneer.*[4] *I took it for granted."*

Moderator about S2: "*How would you feel if it were you participating in the International Women's Day celebration?"*

MFG3: "*Hmm, I'm not sure, maybe we wouldn't think it was anything special or even be able to see that it was totally […] crazy."*

Another connection between the past and the present is seen in the transference of some habits (assumed to be socialist deformations) into the capitalist system.

4 The Pioneer Organisation of the Socialist Youth Union (PO SSM) was a communist youth organisation which operated between 1970 and 1989.

> MFG4 [about S1]: *"Comrade Karpíšek is exactly the sort of young, career-oriented person who was told: "Stick with us and you will be well off." They taught him what to say, what words one should use. It is absolutely normal today in any sales company. If you go for a salesperson position, they teach you the ways in which you should move and speak. Absolutely normal today…"*

4.2. UNCERTAIN GUILT

A rich source of data indicating cultural trauma consisted of comments in which respondents rehearsed their feelings of embarrassment or anxiety during totalitarian socialism. Alternatively, they internalised the feelings of the serial protagonists.

> Moderator: *"Did you consider the scene picturing the bus trip to Austria to be funny?"*
>
> MFG2: *"Not at all, I really sympathised with the characters, hoping that the customs officers would not find anything illegal."*
>
> MFG2: *"I feel strange about crossing borders to this day. Today, one doesn't even have to present a passport and yet I still feel fear and get goose pimples."*

A concept that is often referenced in scholarly reflection on the aftermath of state socialism is the *guilt* felt at collaborating with or silently acquiescing to the CP's rule. The entire 1990s discourse on decommunisation, to a great extent, dealt with a redistribution of the guilt for *"the widespread injustice of the communist regime, the imprisoning of people for publicly stating political views at odds with the policies of the Communist Party and the regime in general"* (Marada 2007, 91). Feelings of guilt (as well as shame, self-flagellation, metaphoric schizophrenia and embarrassment) were indeed present in our respondents' comments, although not in a straightforward form. A feeling of guilt presupposes the existence of a perpetrator—partial or full acceptance of such a role and a stigma left on the cultural memory. In Czech post-socialist culture the position of perpetrator—the symbolic figure guilty of and responsible for the crimes of totalitarian socialism—was never fully determined. Who is to be blamed? The Communist Party's top officials? All members of the Communist Party? The entire silent majority? Insofar as the position of a perpetrator is a no man's land and everybody's land, it is open to being assumed (or imposed upon) by a wide range of actors. The process of consenting to the role of perpetrator may, indeed, include or induce cultural trauma—Bernhard Giesen coined the concept of the 'trauma of perpetrators' to refer to a similar development in

post-Nazi Germany (Giesen, 2004: 115). However, our data reveal a more complex structure that feelings of guilt within the traumatic memories of socialism have a more complex structure than is usually assumed. We found symptoms of feelings of guilt merging with a role of perpetrator in an unusually delicate way. Experiencing trauma is not an effect of obvious collaboration with the totalitarian regime. It is brought about by an essential uncertainty over whether everyday life under socialism was collaboration or not. This "uncertain guilt" combines two frustrations in one (guilt and uncertainty) and puts the synergy effect into motion.

Uncertainty permeating the identity on the move between roles of a victim and a perpetrator can be demonstrated by comparing the two following quotes:

> MFG7 [about S1]: *"My father was forced to join the Communist Party. They came to talk to him about his daughter (it was me) having good school results and whether or not it would suit her to go to high school? So after this type of blackmail and persuasion, he had to agree to become a party member."*

> MFG3 [on watching an episode about the Labour Day parade with her nine-year-old daughter]: *"[…] and I tell her, go sit and watch, look at Husák,[5] look at the way we applauded him."*

In the first statement the discussant clearly sees her father as a victim. In contrast, the logic of the second statement is based on a deeply embedded duality. The respondent seems insecure about who exactly should be under the microscope: the communist president Husák or those who applauded him? Who should be tightly observed: the communist apparatchik or 'us,' the obedient, anonymous mass? Where is the borderline between perpetrators and mere victims in the scene from the film? The comment reflects people's potential collaboration and shows that the position of a perpetrator is not necessarily confined to the top communist officials. Consequently, the identity of the respondent as an ordinary person, who applauded when told to do so, shifts on the victim–perpetrator scale and hardly ever rests in one place. In this case the respondent compulsively invites her daughter to pay attention to the conformist behaviour of the older generation. It can be interpreted as an act of masochism and self-flagellation, as if it could undo the shame. In the comparison sketched above, the cultural trauma of an ordinary man is visible as permanent ambivalence and oscillation. It points to the discontent that results from

5 Gustáv Husák was the President of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic from 1975 until 1989.

the absence of a single overarching narrative that would, once and for all, redeem the ordinary people as mere victims.

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