Aniko Imre’s „TV Socialism“ is the first study to explore television history across socialist Eastern Europe in a comparative manner. Her work is not only remarkable because she grants access to widely neglected television studies from this region by overcoming language barriers. She also showcases how television and socialism can be used as windows into each other, hence, how the engagement with socialist TV can help us understand socialist reality as such. Imre’s train of thought is intriguing because she highlights how tangled the development of Eastern media products was with trends that manifested themselves on the Western side of the Iron Curtain. The study crosses the ideological and geographic barrier embedding research on television in socialist and post-socialist Hungary, Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, the USSR, Yugoslavia and the GDR into a global context. Last, but not least, Imre’s analysis of nostalgia related to socialist TV adds to a currently blossoming debate on the relationship between media friends and mnemonic imagination.

„TV Socialism“ aims at highlighting specific patterns that occurred in socialist adaptations of Western genres rather than providing a comprehensive overview on television history of former Warsaw Pact members. The latter would indeed not be possible considering that the exploration of television in this region has only recently moved into the focus of scholarly debate and archival materials have yet to be explored fully. Nevertheless, the book looks at selected genres in a very stimulating manner that also creates an awareness of methodological issues. In addition, Imre’s argument is enriched by oral history interviews with Hungarian TV-affiliates.

The monograph provides reflections on four kinds of television productions featuring: realism and reality, history, fiction and humour. It engages with these categories based upon a selection of key concepts such as, e.g. competition, nostalgia, gender, and (post)feminism. Imre’s reflections on these concepts break the scope of former studies because they synthesize contemporary patterns imminent to socialist societies with continuities in the post-socialist era.

The first two categories, realism/reality and history, take up most of the argument and dwell on a wide variety findings from a large selection of the abovementioned states. The respective chapters benefit from the contextualisation of selected genre developments in relation to Western formats and the analysis’s timely reach into post-socialism. Topically, the first part, dedicated to realism and reality, deals with tele-education, crime appeal, game shows and post-socialist ethno-racial reality-TV. The subsequent chapter on

1 Currently, the only comparative transnational historical study on a television genre, sitcom, is Christina von Hodenberg. Television’s Moment. Sitcom Audiences and the Sixties Cultural Revolution, New York 2013.
history engages with historical adventures, post-socialist nostalgia and European historical drama.

The analysis of game shows is a particularly intriguing and clear example for Imre’s sharp observation and her thought-provoking conclusions on socialist mentality and its afterlife. She discusses the balancing act between the ideological concept of socialism, nationalism and competition apparent in game show formats. The metamorphosis of cultural codes prevalent in socialism becomes very tangible in the engagement with this genre. The author states that socialist game shows were a space in which the value of talent in ‘small peripheral nations’ and its impact on class mobility precipitated. “But the exaltation of talent as the contradiction within and limit to democratic education erected a solid division between the intellectual elites and the masses.” (p. 104)

István Vágó, a Hungarian game show host, underlines Imre’s verdict and emphasises the post-socialist shift within this pattern: “during socialism, people wanted to watch people who were smarter than themselves. Following socialism, with commercial TV and reality programs well established, viewers wanted to watch people who were less smart than themselves.” (p. 104) On a meta-level, Imre diagnoses that “Eastern European nationalisms thus have a curious schizophrenic psychological effect on their subjects: they interpellate the national citizen to identify aspirationally with the talented upper crust and, by exclusion, to detest the unworthy masses as the reason for the actual, peripheral condition of the nation. There is not much room for identification and a healthy sense of self to develop between these two choices. Eastern European identities balance the self-hate assigned to the talentless with aspirational basking in the collective brightness radiated by the talented.” (p. 105)

In summary, Imre convincingly showcases how socialist societies developed specific identity patterns and sketches continuities that require further and deeper investigation in a cross-national manner.

A second crucial element of the analysis lies in the exploration of links between nostalgia and television. The author pointedly states that „television’s fabric of everyday socialism weaves together both history and memory.” (p. 161) Her reflections on the entanglement between audio-visual materials and the creation of memories and nostalgia put a relationship centre stage that has only recently moved into the focus of scholarly debate. [Ibid] The following quote highlights Imre’s distinct view on nostalgia that is driven by experiences across the region and informed by personal exposure to the processes and emotions involved in nostalgic memory of socialism. „Popular culture and television in particular, remain the principle sites where people can experience the continuing intimacy of the socialist past without having to face public reproach.” (p. 164) In my opinion, Imre rightfully challenges concepts such as Ostalgie as predefined analytical categories with an implicit political dimension that have the potential to blur our vision of nostalgic recollection and affect the self-perception of people who experienced socialism.

The second part of TV Socialism deals with fictional genres exploring women and TV, socialist soaps followed by socialist comedy and (post-)socialist political satire. In contrast to other chapters, Imre’s predominant focus on female protagonists amputates her reflections on gender (pp. 199ff.). This is particularly problematic, as socialist masculinity is often diversely negotiated alongside female experiences in socialist TV-fiction. In contrast to the remainder of the book, the chapters on fiction and gender do not do the complexity and specificity of gender roles in socialist fiction sufficient justice.

Nevertheless, such issues neither undermine the quality and originality of the argument in the remainder of the book nor do they affect Imre’s emphasis of Daphne Berdahl’s claim that socialism needs to be approached with an awareness of its own afterlife (p. 21). Undoubtedly, the author proves that the entanglements between television, society, socialism and post-socialism are indeed very powerful vehicles to explore the history and continuities of European socialism and its links to the West.

Accordingly, TV Socialism is a must read for any scholars of television history, historians of socialist everyday life, those interested in memory and students exploring socialist
history. Imre provides invaluable insights and poses bold questions that will stimulate debates on socialist television for years to come.