

## **Mainstream! Popular Culture in Central and Eastern Europe**

**Veranstalter:** Centre for the Study of Popular Culture, Prague; Faculty of Arts of Charles University, Prague; National Museum of the Czech Republic, Prague; German Historical Institute Warsaw

**Datum, Ort:** 29.10.2020–31.10.2021, Prague and digital

**Bericht von:** Zdenek Nebrensky, Deutsches Historisches Institut Warschau, Außenstelle Prag

Mainstream media representations remain problematic, as excited discussions in Central and Eastern Europe repeatedly demonstrate. The focus of the conference was on the capturing of the zeitgeist, and the examination of mainstream as a vital source of knowledge for unveiling cultural values and traditions. Moreover, the conference attempted to critically explore Central and Eastern Europe as a specific phenomenon thereof. To address this shortfall, the conference asked questions regarding the manifestation of specific cultural values and beliefs inherent in Central and East European societies, a.o. whether values and beliefs came from any particular long-term regional legacies, and how local and regional mainstream media productions interacted with cultural imports from the wider (globalizing) world. More than three dozen scholars from twelve European countries met on the zoom platform and discussed the issue of mainstream in popular culture.

In the first keynote address, IRENA REIFOVÁ (Prague) dealt with the stigmatization of the lower classes and their habitus in Czech reality TV programs. She asked what the potential associations between the shaming practices in selected reality TV programs and remnants of the socialist habitus in the lifestyle of lower-class participants in the programs are. Previous research demonstrated that everyday reality TV is an exercise in neoliberal governmentality and respective technology of the self, which advances the idea of the entrepreneurial self as a capital investment project and a brand. Reifová highlighted the process of stigmatization of those who do not comply with these norms in the cultural

setting of post-socialist neoliberalism. Her talks built on the arguments contending that neoliberal capitalism was implemented in the post-socialist part of Europe with higher momentum and stronger hegemonic power than in the West.

EREN EKIN ERCAN (Istanbul) focused on the transformation of the TV series culture in Turkey. In 2016, after Netflix entered the Turkish market, it became popular as one of the world's most important broadcasters. Netflix, which is particularly in demand among young people, has faced local narratives created by Turkish television series, causing a global perception of visual aesthetics to settle in Turkey. Netflix's biggest impact on Turkish TV culture is that it creates a juxtaposition to Turkish TV series that are contextually similar to each other and take on an ideological role.

EVELİNA TILTA (Salaspils) inquired into the aesthetics of digital media and globalization. She argued that the aesthetics of digital media is deeply connected to the aesthetics of social art and understandings of „beautiful“ and „sublime,“ which is transparently seen through the contemporary digital art/content sharing communities. In the context of Central and East European culture and the impact of the high popularity of digital art spaces and trends (especially within the recent pandemic situation), the comprising attendance of the application of post-colonial ideology can be applied.

ONDŘEJ ŠTĚPÁNEK (Prague) asked how subcultural music bands were integrated into the music mainstream during the post-communist transformation that sparked social and cultural changes in Czechoslovakia. The post-communist transformation was also used by music publishing companies founded in the early 1990s. They seized the opportunity and under the guise of the popularization of previously marginal genres began to spread the originally banned and repressed bands associated rather with subcultures on a mass scale.

PETER FERENC (Prague) researched into the way in which the Czechoslovak communist party shaped listeners' taste in pop music. He stated that the ambition of the communist government was not only cultural hegemony, but also to be the only promoter, pub-

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lisher, and agency for approved artists. In Czechoslovakia, there were three powerful record labels and just one was engaged in international trade. The main export item was classical music; a part of the import was dedicated to western popular music. The regime understood that it was not possible to ignore the existence of phenomena of great global impact and decided to offer the listeners a limited supply of LPs and SPs with western popular music.

LUCIE DUŠKOVÁ (Prague) reflected the misappropriations in post-war Czechoslovak cinema. The longing for rectitude and transparency through criticizing the omnipresent thievery formed a long-lasting motif of Czechoslovak political and public life and gave birth to rich cultural output. One of the strongest periods was the period of destalinization which opened space for mainstream criticism. Expressed in the ironic proverb „He who's not stealing, is stealing from the family,” the critique of the omnipresent misappropriations of public property was reflected particularly in the cinema production.

IVA JELUŠIĆ (Budapest/Vienna) paid attention to the depiction of women in the Croatian men's magazine *Start* created in 1969. The magazine was marked by nude women and an uncritical emulation of western role models. Representation of women as aesthetically pleasing and sexually arousing bodies prevented the full inclusion of the woman fighter (*žena borac*) in the partisan myth on which Tito's dictatorship was founded. By taking into account both textual contributions as well as their visual representations, Jelušić studied western influences in the portrayal of the women's emancipation project as well as the Yugoslav gender order during the 1970s.

SIMONA RODAT (Cernica) traced the phenomenon of nostalgia in present day Romania. She is interested in artefacts and products of western popular culture as remembered by people who spent their lives under the communist regime and outlined the influences on popular culture in that period, such as western trends, according to the various stages the communist regime had been going through. The presentation demonstrated that, while many peoples' memories are sorrowful and bitter, other recollections and considera-

tions regarding the western popular culture of that time are full of warped mourning.

JIŘÍ ANDRS (Prague) returned to the spring of 1965 when the famous jazzman Louis Armstrong – who was at the time already a global pop star – played a legendary concert in communist Czechoslovakia. Musical stars from the West played very occasionally behind the iron curtain and Louis Armstrong in Prague was one of the very first. While most of the works described the subversive political role or esthetical inspirations of western popular music spreading behind the iron curtain, Andrs focused on the technocratic background of the famous concert.

JAN BLŮML (Olomouc) dealt with the methodological issues connected to the research of one of the most successful composers of Czech pop music, Bohuslav Ondráček (1932–1998). He discussed the criteria of the successful composer in terms of the extent and character of his artistic output. It is possible to answer such questions in the case of famous rock bands, however, regarding pop composers, the state of academic knowledge and relevant data is not obviously sufficient.

Based on her ethnographic research through interviews, Natalia Pomian (Warsaw) looked into the longing for the West and youth fashion in 1980s Warsaw where young people dreamed of having western clothes: jeans especially were the most desirable. Young people had to be very creative in order to buy any outfit, because during the economic crisis, the stores were almost entirely empty. Young people (no matter if they were communist or oppositionist background) created the *third culture cycle* as a space of free expression.

Popular music, especially the kind with a folk character, was often the crucial factor in constructing national identities in the post-communistic era, as DAWID KASZUBA (Kraków) argued. The high potential to reach a wide public made musical genres like disco a significant part of renewed mainstream culture. The Ukrainian artist Verka Serdutchka and the Polish artist Sławomir performed with widely recognized symbols of Ukrainian and Polish rural culture. As they used categories of irony and ethnicity, Kaszuba considered their performances as a challenge to the

national mentality and as a part of national heritage.

The following presentations were devoted to the avant-garde music group of Laibach. KATARINA LAMEŠIĆ (Zagreb) described the beginning of Laibach that emerged in a small Yugoslavian town in the early 1980s. Laibach's first concert was forbidden because of their German name of the Slovenian capital Ljubljana, evoking the Nazi occupation during WWII. Over the course of time, Laibach shifted from opposition to state building attitudes.

Following this, IRENA ŠENTEVSKA (Belgrade) presented Laibach's long march into the mainstream from the unpopular group to its concert in communist North Korea where it played as the first western rock band. Throughout its career, Laibach has used different media and approaches to transcend the boundaries of conventional understanding of popular music.

The second keynote address of DINA JORDANOVA (St. Andrews) offered several observations on cultural wars and the geopolitics of popular culture based on personal experience. She emerged from the postcolonial situation of the early 1990s when most of the East European societies successfully replaced Soviet cultural colonialism by dependency on western popular culture. In Eastern Europe, there is an excessive affiliation with western popular culture, but very little awareness of what is going on in the Russian, Indian or Asian popular culture that boomed in the last decades. One of the consequences of that can be the unexpected explosion of muted racism and matters of avoidance.

EMÍLIA BARNA and ÁGNES PATAKFALVI-CZIRJÁK (both Budapest) attempted to analyze the relationship between populism and popular music as a cultural phenomenon in the particular case of Hungary. They aimed to understand how popular music affords populist interpretations. To answer this question, they presented several selected popular music examples that are widely known and popular according to domestic charts and other statistics such as YouTube views. These bands and artists are also associated with the values and identity politics propagated by the governing regime.

Disco polo, an extremely popular lowbrow Polish musical genre, has recently risen to prominence. For years excluded from the mainstream Polish media and music scene, scorned upon as kitschy and unsophisticated, it has remarkably survived outside the mainstream channels of cultural production and dissemination.

MARTA KOTWAS (London) asked how populist political ideology gets entrenched in the public sphere through such cultural phenomena. She argued that the relationship between Disco polo and populism is co-constitutive. Disco polo is a cultural product with an intrinsic populist dimension and as such can be instrumentalized by populist politicians.

The role of disco music in late Socialism was very different to that of other genres of popular music, said JAKUB MACHEK (Prague). The genre, described in its original form as combining romanticism, eroticism and materialism, was openly accepted by authorities and society alike and utilized by almost all popular singers of the period. Hence, there is substantial ambiguity. Disco was adapted to the specific societal conditions and local cultural traditions. As such, it was at once a way of defining the youngest generation and part of an official mainstream culture that was accessible to all generations.

MARKO ZUBAK (Zagreb) examined the German euro-disco sensation Boney M. who performed concerts at the heyday of their global popularity across the entire Eastern Bloc between 1977 and 1979, appearing at major pop-festivals. He linked this little known episode in Boney M.'s career to the wider story of disco in socialism, which for the most part remains absent from the regions' popular musical canon. Among others, the tour illustrated how communist authorities across the region tolerated to varying degrees the import and proliferation of western pop music styles. Contrary to the interpretation that favored rock music due to its supposed intrinsic oppositional content, Zubak argued for a nuanced account of socialist popular music.

#### **Conference overview:**

Karel Šima (Prague): Introduction

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### Keynote lecture

Irena Reifová (Prague): Classed Based Shaming in Czech Reality Programs: Hidden Affinities of Post-Socialism and Makeover Television

#### Panel 1

Chair: Irena Šentevska (Belgrade)

Eren Ekin Ercan (Istanbul): Netflix versus TV: The Transformation of TV Series Culture in Turkey

Evelīna Tiltā (Salapsils), Transferring the Mainstream: Aesthetics of Digital Media and Globalization

#### Panel 2

Chair: Tomáš Kavka

Ondřej Štěpánek (Prague): Integration of Originally Subcultural Bands into the Mainstream after the Velvet Revolution

Petr Ferenc (Prague): Licensed Records – How Did the Czechoslovak Government Shape Listener's Taste in Pop Music?

#### Panel 3

Chair: Jakub Machek (Prague)

Lucie Dušková (Prague): „Thievery Is the Worst Disease That Could Afflict Us.“ Reflecting Misappropriations in Post-War Czechoslovak Cinema

Iva Jelušić (Budapest/Vienna): Forgetting the Partizanka: Women in the Men's Magazine *Start*

Simona Rodat (Cernica): Popular Culture in Communist Romania (1945–1989) as Retraced in Life Histories: Between Nostalgia and Sorrowful Memories

#### Panel 4

Chair: Zdeněk Nebřenský (Warsaw)

Jiří Andrs (Prague): The Technocratic Background of the Gig that Inspired and Shaped a Generation – Louis Armstrong in Prague 1965

Jan Blüml (Olomouc): Composer Bohuslav Ondráček and the Possibilities of Musicological Research of Czech Pop Music in the 1960s–1980s

Natalia Pomian (Warsaw): Longing for the

West. Youth Fashion in the 1980s in Warsaw

#### Panel 5

Chair: Ondřej Daniel (Prague)

Dawid Kaszuba (Kraków): Performing National Irony. Verka Serduchka and Sławomir as Examples of Critical Disco

Katarina Lamešić (Zagreb): Transforming the Discourse: How a Nation-Wide Ban Helped Laibach Reach International Success and What Came After

Irena Šentevska (Belgrade): 40 Years of Laibach: A Long March on the Mainstream

#### Keynote lecture

Dina Iordanova (St. Andrew): Culture Wars and Popular Culture

#### Panel 6

Chair: Marko Zubak (Zagreb)

Emília Barna and Ágnes Patakfalvi-Czirják (both Budapest): The Mainstreaming of Populism through Popular Music in Hungary

Marta Kotwas (London): „Because of your eyes, those green eyes of yours, I've gone mad.“ The Polish Populist Right's Affair with Disco Polo

#### Panel 7

Chair: Blanka Nyklová (Prague)

Jakub Machek (Prague): Czechoslovak Socialist Discotheques as the Heterotopia of Western Life

Marko Zubak (Zagreb): Disco Schlager and Late Socialism: Boney M. in Eastern Europe

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