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Television and the Shaping of Transnational Memories: A Cold War History¹

Sabina Mihelj and Simon Huxtable

Abstract

The majority of literature about the mediation of transnational memory is concerned with historically recent phenomena, and with the most obviously cross-border forms of communication, such as diasporic media, transnational co-productions, or digital forms of mass communication. This article adopts a different approach, seeking to show that the shaping of transnational remembering in and through the media has a long history. To demonstrate this, the article examines selected aspects of cross-border television and representations of the past in the era of terrestrial television, focusing on experiences in state socialist Eastern Europe.

Keywords: transnational memory, television, Eastern Europe, Cold War, state socialism

As Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney point out in their introduction to this themed issue, recent research in memory studies has increasingly sought to break out of the bounds of the nation-state as the taken for granted framework for studying memory. Taking part in a broader project of overcoming methodological nationalism (e.g. Chernilo; Wimmer and Glick Schiller) memory studies scholars have thus endeavoured to investigate the circuits of memory formation below and beyond the nation, seeking to understand the contribution of mnemonic practices to the formation of regional, transnational, global, or cosmopolitan identities and institutions (e.g., Eder and Spohn; Levy and Sznajder). Given the rapid growth of transnational media conglomerations and the seemingly border-defying nature of digital and mobile communication, it is hardly a surprise that media scholars interested in issues of memory have followed suit, giving rise to a growing body of work on the transnational mediation of memory (e.g., Ashuri; Neiger et al.; Shohat and Stam).

Yet, the vast majority of writing about the mediated circuits of remembering below and beyond the nation is concerned with historically recent phenomena, and with the most obviously cross-border forms of communication, such as diasporic media, transnational co-productions, or digital forms of mass communication. The unspoken assumption, or at least an unintended conclusion derived from such a presentist bias, is that the advent of transnational mediated memories is a phenomenon of the present, one spurred by recent technological advances and related processes of globalisation and transnationalisation. This article seeks to question this view, arguing instead that the shaping of transnational remembering in and through the

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media has a longer history. To do so, the article examines selected aspects of cross-border television and representations of the past in the era of terrestrial television, focusing on experiences in state socialist Eastern Europe.

The focus on television and communist-led countries may seem unusual. Television is often seen as a medium tied to the perpetual present, and even associated with cultural amnesia and the “collapse of memory” (Hoskins; Huyssens). Communism, too, is seen as a distinctly future-oriented ideology, premised on the belief in a revolutionary break with the past and the pursuit of utopian ideals tied to visions of a better future (Balina and Dobrenko). In addition, life and culture in state socialist Europe has long been seen as isolated, hidden behind the impenetrable Iron Curtain, and cut off from transnational developments and exchanges. All of these assumptions, however, have been proven incorrect: television has been shown to play an important role in the formation of memory (Edgerton and Rollins; Holdsworth) and recent research has shown that historical events and narratives held a prominent place in state socialist media and culture, especially during the final decades of communist rule (Mihelj and Huxtable; Tumarkin). Finally, it is also becoming clear that the history of state socialist media cannot be divorced from broader, transnational developments, and that television histories in communist-led formed an integral part of global television history (Badenoch et al.; Lundgren, “Live from Moscow”; Mihelj). To put it differently, television in Cold War Eastern Europe, contrary to common convictions, formed part of a shared European and indeed global audio-visual landscape. As we shall see, this embeddedness in transnational audio-visual spaces also provided the basis for its participation in the shaping of transnational memories in Europe.

To demonstrate this, the article starts by considering the general balance of the national and the transnational in the era of terrestrial television, and shows that TV technology, knowhow and institutional infrastructures, as well as TV programming (especially fiction) were to an extent internationalised from early on. Given that a significant proportion of fictional programming focused on the past, it is feasible to argue that the early cross-border flows of TV programming also contributed to a transnationalisation of audiovisual memories. The second part of the article zooms in on selected examples of historical TV fiction produced and/or broadcast in state socialist Eastern Europe, identifying several aspects that testify to their transnational character, ranging from the fact that these programmes were often broadcast in several countries to the fact that they tied national memories to a shared notion of a transnational revolutionary history.²

Television in Europe: Between the National and the Transnational

² Due to restrictions of space, materials presented here are meant to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. Readers interested in a more elaborated and empirically more wide-ranging treatment are advised to turn to other publications arising from the *Screening Socialism* project (e.g. Huxtable et al.; Mihelj and Huxtable). For a full list of publications please see the project website: www.lboro.ac.uk/screening-socialism.

Approaching television in Cold War Eastern Europe from a transnational perspective may seem counterintuitive. The Cold War coincided with the dominance of terrestrial television, broadcasting was largely contained within state boundaries, and television ownership and regulation were tied to nation-states. Indeed, television was often explicitly tasked with fostering nation-building and preserving national culture – a trait shared by broadcasting policies on both sides of the Iron Curtain (Mihelj 2012, Imre 2016). This national order of things, so the story goes, was first disrupted by the proliferation of cross-border satellite channels and the rise of global, profit-seeking media conglomerates from the 1980s onwards, which ushered in a new era of broadcasting, marked by a transnationalisation of both television industries and audiences. At the start of the new century, the switch from analogue to digital television allegedly pushed the denationalisation of television even further, diminishing the capacity of the medium to engender unifying national experiences. As audiences grew increasingly accustomed to consuming television on their own terms, and in their own time, shared experiences were replaced with a myriad of individualised uses and interpretations, which seemingly eschew any link with the national order.

While there is no doubt that this confluence of technological shifts and the global advance of commercial broadcasting brought important changes to television broadcasting, it is misleading to present this transformation in terms of a neat move from national to transnational television. As growing numbers of media historians acknowledge, the history of television was a profoundly transnational affair from early on (e.g. Badenoch et al.; Hilmes). Let us mention just a few examples. The early technological advances and inventions in television broadcasting, while often framed in national terms, formed an integral part of a collective process of technological and cultural ferment that operated on a transnational scale. For instance, the first applications for television patterns in Russia were submitted only a few years after similar devices were developed in Germany, Italy, France, Australia and Austria, to mention just a few (Abramson 16-22), which suggests at least close transnational awareness of, if not cooperation between, scientists working in different parts of the world. Likewise, over the course of the 1920s and the 1930s, the first test transmissions of still and then moving images took place not only London, Paris, Berlin and several US locations, but also in laboratories in Ljubljana, Zagreb, Bucharest, Warsaw and elsewhere in Eastern Europe (Galić 24; Grzelewska et al. 264-265; Urovskii 57-58; Paulu 326). At this stage, not only ideas, but also devices and personnel circulated transnationally.

With the descent of the European continent into World War Two, these transnational exchanges and developments were stopped in their tracks. When work on television technology and infrastructure resumed after 1945, it was quickly drawn into various nation-building projects as well as became part of the Cold War competition, with each country eager to use the medium as a material proof of its ability to master modernity. Yet hidden beneath nationalist and Cold War rhetoric, transnational

interactions continued (Heinrich-Franke and Immel). In 1956, British BBC officials visited the production facilities of Soviet Central Television in Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev, primarily with the aim to share expertise and know-how (Lundgren, “(Un)Familiar Spaces”). In Romania, too, leading television professionals were inspired by British television, developed close relationships with the BBC, and often travelled to the UK to enhance their technical, organizational and editorial skills (Mustata 51-53). Although inevitably shaped by the exigencies of Cold War politics, such contacts arguably contributed to creating a transnational communications space that transcended the Cold War divide.

The same could be said about television programming. Even though the prevalence of terrestrial broadcasting imposed limits on the cross-border circulation of programmes, television professionals soon developed mechanisms designed to defy these limitations. Institutions such as the International Radio and Television Organization (OIRT) and the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) were set up to facilitate programme exchanges, and individual countries established a range of bilateral exchange agreements. Although such infrastructures were often beset by technical problems and politically-motivated suspicions, they nonetheless fuelled steady transnational flows that made the images and narratives broadcast through national channels much more transnational than we may expect. In fact, rather than seeing the different spatial levels of television – from the local and the regional to the national and the transnational – as mutually exclusive, we should rather see them as superimposed on one another. A 1974 programme on the everyday lives of workers in Gdansk and Leningrad offers a case in point: While focusing on everyday life, in specific urban locales, the programme was broadcast on Polish national and Soviet local television and formed part of an exchange organized jointly by the OIRT and the EBU (*OIRT Information* 9).

A variety of empirical data confirms that transnational infrastructures gave rise to notable cross-border flows of television programming. In some countries, imported content constituted more than half of the total volume of broadcast hours – hardly a picture that one could legitimately associate with the dominance of the national. Such influx of foreign content was of course creating significant anxieties among national elites. Over the course of the 1960s and the 1970s, these concerns became intertwined with the Cold War competition over former colonies in the Global South, and fed into a succession of debates within the United Nations and UNESCO, culminating in the drive to create a new, more balanced exchange of information in the world. To provide empirical evidence of global communication imbalances, UNESCO commissioned several global surveys, including two that looked at television broadcasting, one conducted in the early 1970s and the other in the early 1980s (Nordenstreng and Varis; Varis).

Both surveys showed considerable reliance on imported content globally, although both the volume and origin of foreign programming differed markedly from country to country. At one end of the spectrum were the United States, the Soviet Union, China

and Japan, all of which relied overwhelmingly on domestic production and imported only 5 percent or less of their TV programmes. At the other end of the spectrum, Guatemala, Iceland, Singapore, Malaysia, Bulgaria, Zambia and Nigeria imported between 45 and a staggering 84 of their TV content (Nordenstreng and Varis 11-13). The origins of imports varied in predictable ways: while western European countries sourced between 40 and 60 percent of their imports from the United States, countries in the east of the continent were much less dependent on American content. Given the focus of this article, it is also worth noting that reliance on imports was much higher in the realm of entertainment than information, education or sports: with the exception of the Soviet Union, all other East European countries included in the survey imported an average of 49 percent of their entertainment (Varis 151).

This result is important, as it suggests a significant reliance on cross-border exchanges in a category of TV programming that was particularly prone to engagement with the past – namely, television fiction. Indeed, our own analysis of cross-border TV flows in East Germany, Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union shows that imported fiction included historical dramas, especially those produced in other state socialist countries, but also some drawn from Western Europe and the US. For instance, audiences across the region could follow the Soviet spy thriller *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (*Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny*, d.Tat'iana Lioznova, 1973) and the Polish series *Four Tankmen and a Dog* (*Czeteriej pancierni i pies*, TVP, 1966-1970), both of which were set during World War Two. In addition, several countries also broadcast well known historical dramas produced in the West, including BBC's *The Forsythe Saga* (BBC, 1967), a historical family drama set in the early twentieth century, and the US mini-series about slavery *Roots* (ABC, 1977). Although the precise volume of imported programmes engaging with memories of the past is difficult to establish, these examples suggest that cross-border programme exchanges in the era of terrestrial television did contribute to the formation of an audio-visual mnemonic landscape that was, at least in part, transnational in scope. Audiences in state socialist countries -- at least potentially -- became acquainted with mediated memories produced in a variety of countries both east and west of the Iron Curtain.

Transnational television, transnational memories?

Of course, the mere existence of transnational exchanges and programme flows says little about the nature of memories broadcast on the small screen, or about how they were received in a particular context. For instance, what was the balance of the national and the transnational promoted in historical documentaries and fiction broadcast in state socialist countries? If foreign programmes about history were shown, what reactions did they provoke among TV professionals, cultural elites or among the general audience? Did televised commemorations of key historical events have a notable transnational dimension, or were they mostly celebrated as part of national histories? These are complex questions that we cannot hope to answer

comprehensively on the pages that follow. Instead, we shall limit ourselves to a set of examples that illustrate some of the relevant tendencies.

To start with, it is worth noting that the selection of foreign history programming was often filtered through a communist memory of the past. In some instances, programmes produced in the west were explicitly chosen with the intention to vilify the capitalist world, demonstrate its moral decline, and hence buttress a vision of history premised on the superiority of communism. For example, BBC's *The Forsythe Saga* purportedly found its way to Soviet audiences because it showed the fall of "the highest echelons of the ruling British bourgeois class" (quoted in Paulu 172). It is also easy to find other examples where foreign history programmes were chosen because their historical focus was sufficiently aligned with the communist mnemonic narrative, even if in a very superficial manner. Such a rationale could well have guided the Yugoslav acquisition of the Italian mini-series *The Young Garibaldi* (*Il Giovane Garibaldi*, 1974), broadcast in Yugoslavia in 1975. Although Garibaldi is largely remembered in Italy for his military and political contributions to the creation of a unified Italy, the fact that the series focused on his youth, spent in part in South America, was enough for the Yugoslav popular press to present Garibaldi as "the Che Guevara of nineteenth century". In this way, they indirectly likened Garibaldi's efforts in the Italian struggle for unification to those of communist guerrilla fighters engaged in national liberation wars in the twentieth century (Šterić). Yet, we should be careful not to read every single historical import in Eastern Europe through a communist lens. For instance, the Yugoslav popular press introduced the US mini-series *Roots* (ABC, 1977) simply as a widely acclaimed programme, and hence a "must see" (Milanović). Despite the focus on slavery, no attempt was made in TV magazines to rehash old arguments about America's racism and the superiority of the communist solution to ethno-racial diversity. Regardless of the kind of framing adopted, however, it is clear that such programmes contributed to a sense of history and memory that transcended the borders of state and nation.

Apart from importing foreign-produced content addressing historical topics, state socialist broadcasters also regularly arranged co-productions of historical and commemorative programming, or engaged in coordinated production of material designed for exchange. Such efforts were not only transnational in their organisation and form, but also in their content: they were underpinned by an unmistakably transnational form of memory, premised on the grand narrative of the communist revolution, and punctuated by key events such as the Bolshevik-led October Revolution in 1917, Lenin's death in 1924, and World War Two. Typically such collaborative efforts intensified in the run-up to key anniversaries. For example, in February 1967 representatives of Soviet television visited Poland to discuss the production of programmes intended for broadcasting on the forthcoming anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, dedicated to topics such as the Soviet-Polish friendship during World War Two and economic ties between the two countries (*Radio i Telewizja*).

Memories of a shared history also commonly surfaced during celebrations of 1 May – Labour Day, when televised festivities and dedicated programmes celebrated not only the contribution of individuals to the construction of communism in their own nations, but also spoke of an international fraternity of workers (encapsulated in the slogan “Workers of the world unite!”). In the Soviet Union, such programmes promoted ideals of socialist internationalism, referred to fraternal countries elsewhere in the communist world, and praised their efforts to establish and maintain peace (Huxtable et al.). The vision of both national and transnational unity was embodied also in the format of broadcasts. In the GDR, for instance, the live broadcast of the Labour Day parade included not only coverage from several East German cities but also from the parades in a range of other Eastern European capitals (Huxtable et al.).

That said, these transnational, pan-communist memories were neither uncontested nor shared uniformly across the region. In Romania, the celebration of workers’ international solidarity and its historical achievements gradually gave way to an increasingly nationalist narrative of history, largely devoid of references to the common fate of communist-led countries globally. In Yugoslavia, on the other hand, the transnational brotherhood of working nations took on a locally specific twist, aligned with the country’s independent geopolitical stance taken by Tito after 1948, when Yugoslavia split from the Soviet-led communist movement. Rather than remembering the transnational unity of peoples led by the Soviet Union, historical narratives celebrated the brotherhood and unity of Yugoslav nations, and their common struggle for national liberation during World War Two. One of the key tasks of Yugoslav television, as outlined in a 1980 document on programme policies, was to contribute to the equality and unity of Yugoslav nations and nationalities, while also enhancing a sense of shared Yugoslav patriotism and emphasizing the importance of the National Liberation Struggle and the socialist revolution during World War Two.³

Even in countries that adhered to a joint memory of Soviet-led revolutionary history, marked differences in emphasis could be noted, which reflected underlying power imbalances and centre-periphery relations. Soviet television, for instance, promoted a historical narrative in which the brotherhood of working classes appeared as the Soviet Union’s gift to the rest of the world, while in the GDR and Poland commemorative programmes reflected a sense of historical indebtedness to the Soviet Union (Huxtable et al. 2016). In sum, the televised memories of the revolution, while often transnational in both content and form, were typically inflected by the national context, and thus provided nationally specific versions of transnational memory.

³ Croatian State Archives, f. 1228, d. 5601, “Smernice za programsku politiku Jugoslovenskih Tv Stanica za 1981. Godinu”, 3.

A similar argument can be developed in relation to collective memories promoted by domestically produced television fiction. As shown elsewhere, a significant proportion of serial fiction produced in the region was set in history: in Yugoslavia, historical fiction took up over a third of domestic serial production, while in the Soviet Union, the proportion stood at almost two-thirds (Mihelj and Huxtable). Although the key periods represented in TV dramas varied from country to country, in line with nationally specific historical narratives, the patterns also display a notable degree of transnational commonalities, rooted in the shared adherence to the communist, revolutionary memory of the past. In both the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia historical drama thus centred on historical moments deemed key to the country's revolutionary history, and specifically to the establishment of communist rule in the country – such as the period from 1917 to 1941 in the Soviet case, and World War Two in both countries (Mihelj and Huxtable).

Transnational aspects of fictional memories were not visible only in the selection of historical events and periods featured, but also in the way these events were represented. For instance, the Soviet four-part drama *Drawing Fire* (*Vyzyvaem ogon' na sebia*, d. Sergei Kolosov, Mosfilm, 1963-1964) is based on real-life events in the village of Seshcha and the adjoined airfield near the border with Belarus and Ukraine, which was bombed in Autumn 1943. The plot is aligned with the transnational vision of revolutionary history, embodied in the cooperation between partisan troops from across Eastern Europe. The story follows Ania Morozova, who returns home to find her town bombed and her relatives killed, and then joins the Partisan movement. With the help of Czech and Polish troops working at the airport, they are able to attack the airfield, despite heavy losses, including Ania. A similar narrative of war-time brotherhood and unity is found in the iconic Polish series *Four Tankmen and a Dog* (TVP, 1966-1970), which recounts the adventures of a mixed Soviet-Polish tank crew fighting the German army.

Yet, national variations should be acknowledged, too. Given the peculiar geopolitical standing of Yugoslavia, it is of no surprise that Yugoslav historical series largely eschewed references to Soviet-Yugoslav friendship. Instead, popular serial dramas such as *The Outcasts* (*Otpisani*, TV Belgrade, 1974) and *The Bonfires of Kapela* (*Kapelski kresovi*, TV Zagreb, 1975), which revolved around events and characters from World War Two, served as reminders of brotherhood and unity among Yugoslav nations themselves. In Romania, on the other hand, historical fiction set during World War Two remained within a largely national mnemonic universe, celebrating the achievements of the domestic resistance movement, as was the case with *The Following* (*Urmarirea*, TVR, 1971), which told the story of a group of young Romanian men running an illegal radio station reporting from the battlefield, and *The Freckled Boy* (*Pistruiatul*, TVR, 1973), which featured a young boy helping a fugitive who turns out to be a Romanian communist hero. In sum, while guided by common undertones of revolutionary history and the belief in the advance of communism, serial fiction in each country – much as other aspects of historical and

commemorative programming – also promoted a national version of revolutionary memory.

Conclusions

As materials presented in this article attest, there are clear grounds for arguing that the transnational mediation of memory is not a recent phenomenon, but has a considerably longer history that extends well beyond the era of satellite television and the World Wide Web. Even terrestrial television, a medium often deemed to be unavoidably nation-centred and resistant to transnationalisation, offered many opportunities for the formation of cross-border memories. In the context of Eastern Europe, these transnational capacities of terrestrial television were further enhanced by the dominance of a shared narrative of revolutionary history, as well as by close political and cultural ties between the countries, especially those belonging to the Warsaw pact. As a result, memories promulgated by television in this part of Europe were often notably transnational, while also retaining a measure of national specificity.

Television is of course not the only medium that contributed, historically, to the transnationalisation of memory. Film, in particular, offers another promising area for investigation into early periods of media memories that defy national and state borders. As with television – and in fact from earlier on – film distribution increasingly operated on a transnational scale, thereby generating cross-border circuits of historical narratives that cannot be fitted into a simple national grid. Despite political obstacles, and sometimes in part because of them, these circuits continued throughout the Cold War. This period also saw the growth of transnational co-productions, some of which extended beyond the Iron Curtain (e.g. Siefert). As a result, film memories, too, would have taken on a recognisable transnational dimension from early on.

Let us also note that acknowledging the longer history of transnational media memories is not merely a matter of historical detail. If it is the case that the history of media memories before the rise of satellite broadcasting and digital media cannot be seen exclusively through a national lens, then this begs the question of what, if anything, is specific about transnational audio-visual memories of the present era, apart from the fact that they are formed in a technologically different environment. To put it differently, considering the history of transnational media memories in Europe forces us to move beyond the facile equation of transnationalism with the present, and consider how and why the balance of the national and the transnational has changed over time. As far as television memories are concerned, we could argue that what happened from the 1980s onwards was not a decline of the national as such, but rather a decline of state monopoly over television memories and their ties with the nation. Instead of being shaped by state regulation, television's involvement in sustaining both national and transnational memories has become increasingly dependent on market forces. It is this, rather than the simple nation-transnational

binary, that can offer a basis for a more convincing explanation of why and how mediated memories have changed over time.

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