

TV Media in the Soviet System: The Collision of Modernity and Restrictions

ŽYGINTAS PEČIULIS

Department of Journalism and Audiovisual Media, Faculty of Communication, Vilnius University, 7 Maironio Street, 01124 Vilnius
Email: zygintas.peciulis@kf.vu.lt

The emergence of the new media was related to the established social order at that time. Television in Lithuania was first introduced in the late 1950s when the country was under the Soviet rule. Soviet ideology utilized the modern media to plan the modernization of the society, i.e. to create a new system. And the achievement of the goals involved coercion, deceit and information censorship. The technologically advanced TV media was restrained by the authorities. The author of this text analyses Soviet Lithuanian television in the context of other media, exhibiting *modus operandi* of the Soviet regime and the behaviour of people who worked in the system.

Keywords: media, television, Soviet system, content design, adaptive behaviour

INTRODUCTION

The new technological media in Lithuania were introduced under different geopolitical circumstances. Photography, telegraph and cinematography spread around Lithuania in the 19th c. while it still was a part of the Russian Empire. With the restoration of the country's statehood, Lithuanian radio started broadcasting in 1926 from the temporary capital Kaunas, whereas television (TV) appeared when Lithuania was incorporated into the Soviet Union. The modern media became an ideal vehicle for disseminating the ideology of the new society that was being created. The Soviet propaganda dubbed the Communistic utopia a modern system, characterized by an upheaval of economic relations, worldview and lifestyle as well as related initiatives: collectivisation, industrialization and formation of a new individual. Soviet ideology made use of the permeation, universality and content accessibility of television. Although TV was one of the most ideologically driven means of propaganda, it has a mixed impact on the society. With a view to disclosing the functioning of TV media under an authoritarian regime, we will offer a brief description of the Soviet system and the role that audio-visual media played in Soviet Lithuania. Their content was subject not only to the official doctrine but also to the adaptive behaviour of its creators – self-censorship, semi-conformism and alt-reality. This research focuses on the aspiration of the Soviet regime to utilize audio-visual media for the ideology of the new system as well as the contradiction of technological advancement and restrictions imposed by the system.

The field of research is the factors that determined the emergence and functioning of TV in the Soviet system, the relation of the new media to other audiovisual media, and cases of the behaviour of the creators. The research method is the analysis of opinions of Soviet researchers, system functionaries and Soviet TV workers.

CONTRADICTIONS IN THE VIEW ON THE SOVIET REGIME

Changes in the attitude towards the Soviet era are important in the analysis of this topic. G. Deleuze (2013) defined the present as an edge of the shrunken past, ‘time simultaneously turns present into past and preserves the past within itself’. Various approaches and attitudes collide in the analysis of the Soviet times. At times the concept of *totalitarianism* is applied to the whole Soviet period and the creative expression controlled by the system is referred to as *totalitarian realism* (Golomshtok 1994). Other researchers only detect attributes of totalitarianism in Stalin’s rule. Z. Norkus (2008: 220) refers to N. Khrushchev’s thaw as *totalitarianism without terror or populist totalitarianism*, and defines L. Brezhnev’s rule as *post-totalitarianism*, i.e. totalitarianism without terror or ideology. According to J. E. Tunbridge and G. J. Ashworth (1996), two strategies are usually employed when analysing the Soviet era – conscious collective amnesia when one pretends that nothing has happened or relativism (meaning that each and everyone collaborated in one way or another). Z. Bauman and L. Donskis (2013) exhibit the divergent bipolar approach to the Soviet era – resistance or collaboration. G. Mažeikis (2017: 11–29) also speaks about diametrically opposite attitudes towards the past. ‘The signatures of oblivion can be described in two ways. Firstly, as the apparent coercive acts of destruction of the unwanted past: demolition of sculptures and monuments, destruction of heritage, censorship of photographs, rewriting of historical testimonies and rearrangement of library collections. Secondly, a different kind of oblivion is related to the withering of good and evil and them becoming more or less undistinguishable’. In R. Čepaitienė’s (2007: 36–50) opinion, the Soviet past is either ignored in the public discourse or becomes a set of ideological clichés in the hands of politicians.

The image of the Soviet era changes historically. According to A. Narušytė (2015), when Lithuania regained its independence, the *totalitarian paradigm*, a binary opposition which allowed one to exhibit the control mechanism, the criminal nature of the system, and the resistance movement, prevailed. The author attributes the increased attention to the Soviet times to the second phase of globalization when the politics of identity was substituted with the politics of memory. At the beginning of this century, the younger generation of scholars came up with the *post-revisionist* approach, suggesting that the network society, which existed alongside government structures, had developed a unique culture of survival and adaptation to the regime.

Testimonies of those who lived in the Soviet era are also debatable. S. Boym (1994) argues that memories of Socialism fluctuate between personal biography and state ideology, between individuality and collectivism, between empathy and hatred. L. Donskis (2016) points at our attempts to escape the Soviet past which we are ashamed of and which prevents us from creating a favourable narrative about ourselves. Then the only options left are either to fake the past by creating a beautiful legend or to keep silent. R. Grišinaite (2015: 150–153) interprets the attitude towards the Soviet era as a camouflage tactics when the tactics of deceit typical of the Soviet times is employed. That is why it is difficult to interpret the facts and phenomena of the Soviet era based on fragmentary and contradictory sources as they tangle you up ‘in the cobweb of understatement, half-open language, and lies’ (Švedas 2010: 26–48).

In an attempt to expose efforts of Soviet people to adapt to the regime, a number of behaviour models and their assessments will be presented.

THE ILLUSION OF MODERNITY

Because of its propaganda role, TV media fell into a strong grip of the Soviet system. In 1955–1970 a centralized TV broadcasting system was established and local units under the control of the Soviet Union Television and Radio Committee were set up. The TV would retransmit Soviet rituals (congresses, plenary meetings, demonstrations, conquest of the space), in the 1960s becoming the most influential media covering all spheres of the Soviet life (Bagirov 1964: 135–143). The integration of television into the Soviet system emphasized modernity of the new media. In his novel *Uostas mano neramus* ('My Troubled Harbour') M. Sluckis (1980) idealized television: 'The television centre is more than just a secret. It attracts like a magnet.' The TV offers new standards, though, according to R. Sadauskas, 'television only seems to be unrestricted freedom and modernity, in fact, everything is strictly regulated there' (Pečiulis 2012: 78–81). Television becomes an important agent in the Soviet system of indoctrination and is invoked for the *bolshevization* of the image (Feigelson 1990: 48–65). Just like photography or cinematography, television is expected to disseminate ideas of industrialization, urbanization, mass education and creation of a new Soviet man. According to M. Šulauškas (1998: 5–8), the totalitarian nature of the system is determined by the turbomodernizational aspirations to maximally accelerate modernization, however, the Soviet modernity is characterized by an increase in supervision and control taking extreme forms under the totalitarian regime (Leonavičius 2008: 219–233). Idealization of the Soviet system becomes the norm and attempts to challenge it are viewed as the critique of the Soviet system (Narušytė 2008: 112–115).

The ability of audio-visual media to disseminate images to mass audiences is in line with the challenge of modernizing the Soviet system. The industrialization of visual discourse makes use of 'the unlimited image reproduction, documentality, realism, and automation of visualization' (Keturakis, Leonavičius 2002: 40–49). Television, similarly to Socialist realism photography, is tasked with portraying the optimistic life style and formation of a hero image as well as the cult of work (Linnap 1993). Visual media create the illusion of the immediate, objective and real. The alleged objectivity of audio-visual media does not prevent one from content manipulations – editing, concealing or deleting (Narušytė 2011). According to V. Michelkevičius (2011), the dissemination of audio-visual media and the accessibility of content that did not require special training allowed the implementation of the much exalted by the Soviet propaganda proximity to the people.

Among the aims of the system is the formation of a new human and implementation of new values. All-inclusive television of universal definition has turned into the ultimate promoter of alternative rituals, creating a new holiday mythology with assorted 'motifs of folk traditions, generalized and newly conceived symbols, and ideological elements' (Putinaitė 2004: 25). The transformation of the superstitious society into the modern one is pursued by replacing Christian story lines with Soviet, atheistic ones, oblivious to the true meanings of folk motifs and rituals (Putinaitė 2007: 21). Other researchers refer to the hiding behind official Soviet ethno-cultural national organizations as a *camouflage activity* which allegedly allows legal dissemination of experiences related to the non-Soviet reality (Ramonaitė 2015: 112). The pompousness of shows aired on the Soviet TV is nothing more than an empty and lifeless form (Gliebkin 1998: 105), though has a huge emotional impact on the isolated society. According to A. Narušytė (2008: 112–115), irksome dissemination of modernization slogans results in apathy of a part of the society as an expression of social protest. Although the *boredom aesthetics* of stagnant environment is characteristic of the Soviet society, the Soviet propaganda constructs certain cycles and demonstrates a permanent exposition of past mistakes which

creates the illusion of change. A peculiar perception of the Soviet time is framed with the help of suggestive channels of audio-visual communication. An individual could only associate the present time with the depersonalized future overshadowing the present (Putinaitė 2007: 41). M. Heller refers to the Soviet planning cycles, the so-called five-year plans, as a form of time nationalization that is in control of people's activities (Geller 1994: 48–55). L. Jerphagnon (1965: 110) dubs them *anonymous time* when the same actions are repeated over and over again and everything becomes banal and boring.

IDEOLOGICAL SUPERVISION AND ADAPTATION SCHEMES

Soviet ideology attempts to justify censorship through the pursuit of modernity as well as formation of a new social order and its perfect members. Censorship becomes a means of protection from the outer world as it is easier to manipulate people incarcerated in an airtight information space and dose out content separating it from the context (Vaiseta 2012). The Soviet Lithuanian Radio and Television Committee employed officers of the General Directorate for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press (Glavlit) whose function was to approve TV and radio scripts. According to A. Streikus (2004: 61–62), the said scripts were perfectly clean and Glavlit rarely found any ideological errors. Cases when creative professionals left television for the film studio suggest a very strict control in the former. H. Šablevičius' documentary *Atspindžiai* ('Reflections') and V. Žalakevičius' feature film *Visa teisybė apie Kolumbą* ('The Whole Truth about Columbus') were banned. Among the main reasons for the control of TV programs was mass audience. The film *Visa tiesa apie Kolumbą* was not suitable for TV audiences due to its *Dostoyevskian* manner and thus had to be shown to limited numbers of cinema-goers (Lietuvos televizija 2017: 167–171). Works intended to be shown on the central television of the USSR had to be approved in Moscow. The allowable norms were subject to change, therefore it was difficult to predict the decision. 'The previews would cost us a lot of nerves. <...> We had to learn various tricks. Let's say, you shoot the skyline of Vilnius and there are thirty-six churches. So as not to scare the censors, we would cut a tree branch and put it in front of the camera to cover the crosses,' remembered the film director J. Janulevičiūtė (Pečiulis 2012: 68–71). G. Dauguvietytė (2006: 121) admitted: 'We were scared to death of TV and radio director Januitis <...>. So scared that we were trying to please him.' At times things would go too far. For instance, in the TV film *Kupiškėnų vestuvės* ('Wedding in Kupiškis') the wedding scene in the church was left out; however, during the preview in Moscow it was noticed and the creative team of the film were accused of distorting reality (Pečiulis 2012: 33–36). Suspicious implications were at times detected in various details, decorations, and even lighting. The TV leadership were irritated by dusk, dark colours (what kind of hints are these when the country is on its way to the bright future), dissatisfied with the weeds growing alongside country roads (negative portrayal of collectivization). A puppy with a red ribbon in a TV musical would be considered an anti-Soviet provocation. H. Šablevičius was criticized for showing 'objectively plain Soviet people' from Altai region (Pečiulis 2012: 66–68).

TV director J. Baranauskas remembers that they had a Glavlit stamp on their tongues at that time. 'You take and interview and suddenly realize that the person is responding ambiguously, saying things that could be regarded as criticism of the Soviet government. So you take the initiative and answer the questions yourself so that you both would not get into bigger trouble' (Lietuvos televizija 2017: 55). TV director G. Bigelytė acknowledged that with the incessant control and censorship, they had 'a much stricter inner censorship which could neither be circumvented nor deceived or ignored in any way' (Bigelytė 2012: 71). According

to N. Putinaitė (2007), censoring of own behaviour and thoughts was a result of the universal censorship. B. Lewis (2009) noticed an attempt to play with official rules in A. Sutkus' photographs. They do not fully comply with the requirements of the official ideology but do not transcend its boundaries either. M. Matulytė (2011: 19–20) refers to such behaviours as *alt-reality*, an alternative relation with the established reflexion of reality when the image creates a reality of symbolic value rather than reproducing it inertly. A. Andriuškevičius (1977) qualifies the dualism of creators' activities in the Soviet times as *semi-conformism* – simultaneously being a conformist and a non-conformist, reconciling and not reconciling, surrendering and not surrendering. In other words, attempts were made to present the mandatory plot lines in a non-conformist manner. In A. Blyum's (2003) opinion, the conformism of Soviet self-censorship manifested through the efforts to conceal aspects that were unacceptable to the authorities. Semi-conformist behaviours were detectable on television as well. The priorities in 'Telefilm' plans were clearly the mandatory topics of revolution, anti-clericalism and economic achievements. After the tribute to the ideology was paid, the creators somehow managed to 'steal by with the topics that were close to their heart' (Pauraitė-Puplauskienė 2009: 175–177). One of the conformation strategies was the so-called *white poodle principle* – verbal or visual provocation intended to distract attention from what might otherwise be found inappropriate. In order to legitimize a TV film it was sufficient to supplement the narrator's text with something like 'the Party and the Government attach great importance to the equine industry' (Pečiulis 2012: 42–44). T. Vaiseta (2012: 124) believes that the requirement for ideological phraseology generated the reproduction of meaningless texts. M. Martinaitis (2006) dubbed the compulsive repetition of quotations the obligatory graphomania – thoughts whose sources of origin have not been proven are considered worthless or even wrong.

EVALUATING FUNCTIONING IN THE SOVIET TIMES

In independent Lithuania several rather different views on functioning in the Soviet era have been formed. The former Soviet nomenclature usually sticks to the position: *we worked for the benefit of Lithuania*. According to V. Rubavičius (2007: 117–118), they are unanimous in their desire to leave an impeccable image of themselves. This position is evident in the memoirs of Jonas Januitis (1998: 57–64), a long-time head of Soviet Lithuanian radio and television (1953–1987). He is apt to trace propaganda and censorship to the Western tradition, arguing that there is not a single newspaper, radio or TV channel in the world which could be called objective and independent and that information should be presented from class positions.

Memoirs of former TV employees frequently refer to the Western nature of Soviet Lithuanian television. Apparently Moscow was not viewed as an example, on the contrary, the centre tried to look up to Lithuanians (Lietuvos televizija 2017: 250–257). Another common motif is the national character of Soviet Lithuanian television allegedly encouraged by J. Januitis. Such intentions manifested by J. Januitis were also recorded in official documents: 'Cartoons should be dubbed <...>, pauses in the program should be filled in with Lithuanian music. Our program lacks originality, certain national traits' (Lietuvos televizija 2017: 104). Researchers of the Soviet period, however, are certain that nothing at that time would happen spontaneously, all the freedoms and autonomies of the Soviet society were beamed down (Klumbytė, Sharafutdinova 2013). Even satire functioned within strict boundaries and was supposed to 'expose the sophistication of the Soviet system rather than its flaws' (Vaiseta 2012: 148). The limits of criticism were clearly defined: *the ideal power* (Socialist property, planned economy, role of the party, atheism), *the nominal power* (attributes of the Soviet system), *the real power* (the party

government and nomenclature), and *the hyperreal power* (only the lowest ranks of the party nomenclature can be exposed to critique). According to T. Vaiseta (2012: 148–237), the function of critique and self-critique was that of closing the world rather than opening it. Certain TV shows (*Petraičių šeimoje* ‘In Petraičiai Family’), for example, were allowed the function of legalization of *contra-memory* (Boym 2001: 61), i.e. rumours, jokes, ambiguities, hints, etc.

G. Mažeikis (2009: 27) suggests that the narratives of those who worked in the Soviet system are peculiar mini-stories where hints, symbols, and other signs lead to the perception of certain logics which ‘when coupled with the wider context, helps explain the grand story.’ Those who worked in the Soviet television speak about dual relationship with the authorities. Some declare non-conformism which prevented them from surviving in the system as they were seeking greater creative freedom and thus ended up in the film studio, the press or choosing some more neutral topics. H. Šablevičius claims that he at every turn felt the desire of the authorities to bring the people to naught. ‘As soon as you stuck your neck out and had the courage to say what you were truly thinking, you got into big trouble’ (Pečiulis 2012: 66–68). In TV director R. Smetona’s opinion, the relationship with the system becomes evident from the fact whether a person believed in the ideas or simply did their job in a professional manner (Pečiulis 2012: 30–33). G. Bigelytė speaks of her honest work for the benefit of Lithuania. ‘This “national staff” took a rocky path to create the television that was defended by the whole nation in January of 1991. I take my hat off to those who understood the true essence’ (Bigelytė 1997: 14–17).

The critical view on the conformist behaviour in the Soviet era is rather evident in Lithuania. According to D. Marcinkevičienė (2009: 74), part of Lithuanian sovietologists consistently follow H. Arendt’s (2001) and other so-called totalitarianists’ approach towards the Soviet regime as the empire of evil. In N. Šepetyš’ opinion, the dual way of life was the actual outcome of Sovietization. In the Soviet times, most Lithuanian intellectuals managed to perfectly adapt to the system accepting the inevitability of the Soviet regime. Some contributed to the creation and dissemination of the culture of lies, repeating certain phrases as a ritual no matter if they believed in them or not, whereas others actually breathed that air. And both were sovietized (from Vaiseta 2011). T. Venclova (2000: 266) is astonished by the behaviour of Soviet intellectuals – the more you licked the boots and the harder you suppressed hatred in your heart, the bigger and more serious figure you considered yourself to be. K. Girnius (1996: 272–273) believes that in the Soviet times most compromises were made for the sake of careerism rather than patriotism. The approximation of *serving Lithuania* and *collaboration* positions is sought. According to V. Klumbys (2009), the behavioural models of adaptation, opposition and resistance, as demonstrated by the cultural elite, were interwoven during the Soviet era. To R. Baločkaitė (2008: 139) the Soviet past is something unpleasant, something that scares, something that you are not able to forget but cannot remember either.

Memoirs and analysts’ insights allow us to feel the spirit of the time and the complex state of those who lived in the system. To live a double life realizing its surreality and repeating the words you do not believe in or start to believe as you incessantly say them. ‘I would go back to my youth. I don’t care for Stalin or Lenin – give me my youth back!’, said movie director G. Skvarnavičius (Pečiulis 2012: 338–341). ‘Memories are so sweet because the moments that seemed painful then, even the day when you fell into a pit, twisted your ankle and spent two weeks at home with a bandage soaked in egg white, seem beautiful when looked back at from the yearning distance’ (Eco 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

1. Television started broadcasting when Lithuania was still part of the Soviet Union. The modern media was turned into a means of Soviet indoctrination favoured for its high permeation, universality and accessibility of content.

2. The Soviet propaganda referred to the utopia of Communism as a new modern system characterized by an upheaval in economic relations, worldview and lifestyle. The ability of audio-visual media to reproduce images matched the need of the Soviet system for modernization. The TV was tasked with the representation of an optimistic view of life and creation of a heroic image of man.

3. Television, similarly to other media, was subject to content regulation (censorship, party directives). Different adaptive behaviours of those who worked within the system can be discerned: *alt-reality* (playing with official rules), *semi-conformism* (simultaneous reconciliation and non-reconciliation with the system).

4. Analysis of the Soviet system led to the distinction of categorical and moderate positions. The former states that Lithuanian intellectuals in the Soviet era were well adapted to the system and participated in Soviet indoctrination. The moderate, however, points out the ambiguity of the situation and related patterns of adaptation, opposition or resistance.

5. In spite of ideological constraints, the Soviet Lithuanian TV, as in other creative spheres, sought ways to realize creative ideas. The following adaptive behaviours were distinguished when analysing people who worked in the Soviet television: self-censorship (operation within the set boundaries), non-conformism (resistance that led to quitting work at the TV), *we worked for the benefit of Lithuania* position (based on the alleged western character of Soviet Lithuanian television as well as fostering of Lithuanian national identity). All of these behaviours have their own arguments, which are usually determined by the position the person had in the system.

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ŽYGINTAS PEČIULIS

TV medija sovietinėje sistemoje: modernumo ir suvaržymų kolizija

Santrauka

Naujųjų medijų atsiradimas susijęs su tuo metu susiklosčiusia visuomenine santvarka. Televizija Lietuvoje atsirado praėjusio amžiaus šeštojo dešimtmečio pabaigoje, šalia esant Sovietų Sąjungos sudėtyje. Sovietinė ideologija modernią mediją pasitelkė visuomenės modernizacijos planui – kurti naują santvarką. To siekta prievarta, melu ir informacijos cenzūra. Technologškai moderni TV medija pateko į suvaržymų gniaužtus. Šiame straipsnyje sovietinės Lietuvos TV analizuojama kitų medijų kontekste, atskleidžiant sovietinio režimo veikimo būdus ir sistemoje veikusių žmonių elgseną.

Raktažodžiai: medija, televizija, sovietinė sistema, turinio formavimas, prisitaikymo elgsenos