Envisioning Socialism

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Conclusion

By 1989, there was a fairly widespread Western consensus that East Germans spent their evenings watching Western television. Even the (former East) German cultural historian Helmut Hanke characterized West German television as “the only open window on the world, a window that, even during the Cold War, was opened each evening in the living rooms of GDR citizens, letting in the messages of another, richer, freer world. . . .”

Many people in the West could not imagine otherwise. Television, far more than other media in the GDR, seemed so thoroughly controlled by the state, producing ghastly propaganda shows such as the nightly “news” Current Camera (Aktuelle Kamera) or the ideological manifest The Black Channel (Schwarzer Kanal) moderated by the infamous Karl-Eduard von Schnitzler. Even if this choice were to bring unwelcome attention from the state security forces, who would not turn to the messages of a “freer,” more fun, and more colorful world?

The assumption that East German viewers watched disproportionately more Western television than their own programming is a construct of the Cold War. It fits a narrative that defines—and dismisses—East German television as an institution of political repression: the most significant, and yet insignificant, organ of a propaganda machine. In this narrative, television in the GDR was merely the conduit of SED propaganda and, as such, was unable to compete with the West, capture the imagination of East Germans, or deal with the real problems of the state before the end of the regime in 1989. Real challenges to the state were made not through television, but instead through literature, and to a lesser extent, film and radio. This narrative also helped to explain the end of communism in East Germany. In this view, the East German audience persistently looked westward, held West German ideals, and sought “real” information about the world. Over time, that allowed the Western media to undermine the Socialist Unity (SED) government of the GDR by revealing the lie that was the Party line and unleashing the seductiveness of life in the West.

Media scholar Michael Meyen argues that such a view is the normaliza-
tion in popular memory of the rather anomalous context of 1989. Over the course of that year, the East German television service (Fernsehen der DDR) lost viewers as its programming became increasingly removed from the social and political realities familiar to many East Germans. Television generally remained silent about the major upheavals under way—including the formation of grass roots opposition groups, rising rates of people leaving the GDR, and the opening of the border to Hungary—and, on 9 November, East Germans had to tune into Western programming to hear SED spokesman Günter Schabowski announce the opening of the border crossing to West Berlin. In the summer and fall of 1989, West German television’s heavy coverage of events in the GDR had become a crucial source of information for East Germans and even helped crystallize opposition groups there. But although this kind of coverage was not the norm of postwar West German television, it came to be understood that way in popular memory. Western news coverage of the 1970s and 1980s instead often gave East viewers the impression that “for them, we’re not even here.” Even viewers who disliked GDR television described it as a better reflection of their lives than West television. If West television generally served an important function as a source of counter-information, people also generally understood it as no less ideological than East television. For most East Germans, the “truth” lay somewhere in between.

Historians of the GDR have reached a sort of consensus that the 1960s proved to be the most successful period of social, political, economic, and cultural transformation in East Germany. Such transformation allowed the emergence of a specifically socialist, national identity, despite claims to the contrary by Peter Caldwell, Dietrich Orlow, and others. In what he describes as the “first book to show how national identity was invented in the GDR,” historian Jan Palmowski contends that, by 1989, the only significant identities were local. The SED worked for forty years to construct an edifice of “national” identity but achieved, at best, rhetorical observance of the “public transcript,” that is, lip service paid to the Party’s version of what the GDR should be. When the revolution came, that edifice quickly fell away, leaving behind a passion for Heimat that those living in the GDR shared with their counterparts in the West. Whereas Palmowski maintains that the SED sought to impose a national identity that the people resisted to varying degrees, work by Daphne Berdahl and, more recently, Edith Sheffer suggests very different conditions for identity formation. At Neustadt and Sonneberg in the German borderland, postwar East and West German identities began to emerge just as soon as the occupation did and were fueled by the traditions, legacies, and resentments of the region’s common past. In this interpretation, identities grew in response to SED pro-
nouncements and East Germans’ exercise of Eigensinn; state-sponsored festivals, events, and celebrations; the lived experiences of daily life; geopolitical considerations; and personal passions and resentments.

A new, socialist community emerged that differed from the larger pan-German community of the immediate postwar years and the West German community forged in the “economic miracle”; it also differed from the collective entity envisioned by the East German state. Television helped mediate this transformation. It did so by envisioning for East Germans just how their society was (and could be) different from the West. The principle of “cultural proximity,” elaborated by media scholar Joseph Straubhaar, explains how this project could be self-reinforcing. Straubhaar posits that audiences are drawn first to the programming that most approximates their lives and worldviews, which, in turn, can undermine the effectiveness of cross-border “media imperialism.”

In the German case, for example, some West Germans did watch DFF programming, especially feature films, but quiz shows about Trabis and big socialist spectacles did not appeal to them. In 1958, a West German viewer wrote to let the DFF know that “[t]elevision has proliferated greatly in Lower Saxony, especially since one can get the television shows of the GDR.” This viewer’s social circle loved films, especially “feature films and cultural films from the Soviet Union,” but quiz shows were “very unpopular,” exasperating, and “rejected as idiotic kitsch.” These comments demonstrate the operation of “cultural proximity”: programming with a neutral or familiar mode of access, such as films, were acceptable to this viewer and his friends, while entertainment programming that drew upon—and celebrated—a whole different social experience of everyday life alienated them. A similar process of demarcation occurred in the GDR.

Since its inception, the DFF could never fill the television schedule with original programming, relying instead on everything from guest productions, transmissions from local cultural organizations and factory events, to films and other programming produced at home and abroad. In the early 1960s, they could begin to rely on programming, primarily political and sporting events (and including a live broadcast of Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin’s return to earth after his first manned flight to space, transmitted via Intervision, a consortium of Eastern European television broadcasters that spanned 9,000 miles). The DFF was not the only broadcaster facing this situation, exemplified by the growing transnational market in television programming. By 1965, for example, the fine line between profit and loss in the American television industry was already defined by its overseas sales of television productions. Not just American television studios but Eastern European ones were produc-
ing content for this market, content that was culturally fuzzy enough for trans-
national consumption, and, as we have seen, often not politically acceptable
enough for broadcast on East German television. As the transnational market
developed (or succumbed to) an industrial mode of production, programming
that was innovative, experimental, and culturally specific gave way to econo-
mies of scale. In the 1970s, for example, Agitation Commissioner Eberhard
Fensch tried to appeal to the television service on behalf of one of the GDR’s
leading theatrical lights, to produce and broadcast a live theater production. By
that time, Adameck believed the transmission of theater to be “too expensive,”
requiring too many resources for too little return: audiences did not like it, and
it monopolized broadcast technologies best deployed elsewhere. The tyranny
of the television schedule led to increasing seriality, reflecting but also struc-
turing the routinization of life in postwar industrial society (in the GDR and
elsewhere). DFF viewers called for “evening-filling entertainments,” and they
increasingly relied on them to relax at the end of a hard day’s work.

Television’s purpose as a medium of entertainment and relaxation, al-
ready recognized in the early 1960s, was ratified once again at the Eighth Party
Congress of the SED in 1971. Walter Ulbricht’s successor, Erich Honecker,
took the stage and pronounced DFF television “boring.” According to Hon-
ecker, the DFF
could look back on good achievements, [but] should endeavor more
strongly to improve the program, overcome a certain boredom, take into
account the need for good entertainment, frame television journalism
more effectively, and match the expectations of that group of the working
people, who start their working day very early and therefore want to see
valuable television programs already in the early evening hours.

The “boredom” identified by Honecker was a situation of the SED’s own mak-
ing. Since the cultural conference of 1960, the Party had held television pro-
gramming up as an example to other GDR media, because it engaged the lives
of East Germans in entertaining and thoughtful ways. Its television plays
depicted the transformation of socialist life in inspiring narratives of positive
heroes and their contributions to socialism, modeling, by the early 1960s, what
socialist realism should look like. Television also fulfilled SED expectations of
the kind of impact that socialist realist art should have, because it could reach
so many Germans in East and West. But by 1963, the inexorable pressure of the
schedule, compounded by the political mandate to appeal to two populations
inhabiting diverse viewing positions while still transmitting “politically reli-
able” messages, took its toll. After the Eleventh Plenum, the DFF took the path of least resistance in meeting these contradictory challenges: filling the airwaves with programming that would easily pass muster, regardless of the artistic value, potential for uplift, or other, perhaps idealistic, values that had characterized the earlier program. The huge live spectacles that consumed as many as one-quarter of DFF staff to broadcast just one day of programming disappeared by the late 1960s. Claudia Dittmar asserts that Honecker took a personal interest in television when he took power, even reserving the right to make mundane decisions about programming and the television schedule. The path he defined for television, in the interests of making it “more entertaining,” was to look westward. In the 1970s, but especially in the 1980s, the DFF expanded the amount of programming that featured Western “stars,” reproduced Western models, or even originated in the West.

Television in East Germany emerged and grew in a way that was not exceptional for modern, Western, industrial societies. Writing in 1965, American media scholar Wilson Dizard noted that the viewing density (number of receivers per capita) in the GDR was the highest in the eastern bloc. He described the DFF as the “professional equal of any in the world,” which broadcast a diverse range of programming, including operas and plays that were “often superior to West German television.” Dizard’s role as a contemporary observer limits the historical usefulness of his assessments, and historical analysis does not confirm all of his assertions. For example, he described the DFF as a “heavy-handed propaganda outlet” and claimed that, in 1964, the DFF had fired commentator Eduard von Schnitzler because (political) “liberalization was out of hand” on East German television. As I have shown here, the SED attempted to achieve political discipline, but in a very different way than Dizard describes, and, in any case, “liberalization” would not have come from von Schnitzler, moderator of, among other things, Black Channel. Dizard also characterized television as “developing as a powerful force for ending party-imposed isolation that separated East from West for two decades.” As we have seen here, the SED never conceived television broadcasting as a means of cutting East Germans off from the West, but rather as a means of attracting and shaping a pan-German audience.

If GDR television developed unexceptionally for modern, industrialized societies in the broadcast era, the question remains in what ways it was particularly “socialist.” Television exhibited a number of cultural continuities with the German past, not least the SED’s reliance on the legacy of German classicism. As television workers grew more adept at representing the world on screen, they began to experiment with program forms, but this increasingly
gave way to audience expectations, which had been defined by the media universe of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\textsuperscript{24} The content of early television—the world represented within those forms—was quite different, and programming defined people not by their family, neighborhood, or region, but by their occupation, encouraging them to identify with their class interests. But even that gave way in the 1970s and 1980s. “Family” series (shows that combined elements of the sitcom and the soap opera), that had once sought to remove the idealized family from bourgeois structures, had, by the late 1970s, “abandoned the uniqueness of the socialist family in favor of international trends.”\textsuperscript{25} This reflected and was compounded by the rising influence of Western and Western-influenced content. As the program was increasingly saturated with Western and Western-influenced programming, the DFF (at the behest of the SED) undermined its own nation-building project.