

MAINSTREAM! POPULAR CULTURE IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE CONFERENCE REPORT



From 28 to 31 October 2020, the German Historical Institute Warsaw organized, in cooperation with the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, the National Museum of the Czech Republic, and the Centre for the Study of Popular Culture the online conference “Mainstream! Popular Culture in Central and Eastern Europe.” More than three dozen scholars from twelve European countries met on the Zoom platform and discussed the issue of the mainstream in the popular culture.

Mainstream media representations remain problematic, as excited discussions in Central and Eastern Europe repeatedly demonstrate. An uncritical admiration for pop cultural idols who spread joy under different political regimes on the one hand and condemnation of their kitschy art associated with their selling out under these regimes on the other, confirm, that mainstream popular culture can become symbols of any given period. Therefore, the focus of the conference was on the capturing the “spirit of the time” (*Zeitgeist*), and the examination of the 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.

The keynote address dealt with the stigmatization of the lower classes and their habitus in Reality TV programs. 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. The neoliberal capitalism was implemented in the post-socialist part of Europe with higher momentum and stronger hegemonic power than in the West. The afternoon conference session was opened by presentations which focused on the transformation of the TV series culture and the aesthetics of digital media in the process of globalisation. Netflix became popular as one of the world’s most important broadcasters. In Central and Eastern European cultural mainstream, 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.

The second day of the conference started with the presentation reflecting the misappropriations in post-war cinema. It was also paid attention to the depiction of women in the men’s magazine and to the Western popular culture as remembered by people who spent their lives under the communist regime. Based on qualitative ethnographic research, it was looked into the longing for the West and youth fashion in 1980s when young people dreamed of having western clothes: jeans especially were the most desirable.

The ambition of the communist government was not only cultural hegemony, but also to be the only promoter, publisher, and agency for approved artists. The criteria of the successful artists in terms of the extent and character of their artistic output is



possible to find in the case of famous rock bands, however, regarding pop composers, the relevant data is not obviously sufficient. Disco music was very different to that of other genres of popular music. It was openly accepted by authorities and society alike. Musical stars from the West played very occasionally behind the iron curtain and producers behaved like skilful predators of the musical market. The German euro-disco sensation Boney M performed concerts at the heyday of their global popularity across the entire Eastern Bloc appearing at major pop-festivals.

Other presentations asked how subcultural music bands were integrated into the music mainstream during the post-communist transformation. Their long march from the unknown music groups into the mainstream began in the late 1970s when their first concerts were forbidden. After the collapse of the communism they have used different media and approaches to transcend the boundaries of conventional understanding of music, and inspected the relationships between art, politics, and popular culture. Popular music, especially the kind with a folk character, was often the crucial factor in constructing national identities. It could also assist the mainstreaming of populist ideologies. For example, disco polo was instrumentalized by populist politicians as a genre of popular culture enjoyed by the “pure people,” whom these politicians claim to represent.

At the end of the conference, it was offered several observations on cultural wars and the geopolitics of popular culture based on personal experience. In the early 1990s, most of the East European societies replaced Soviet cultural colonialism by dependency on Western popular culture. The Cold War as a cultural war was won by winning cool consumerism. The possibility to consume and manage oneself self in the store became the battleground of cultural wars as post-communist cinema repeatedly showed. Authorities gave huge space to popular culture very quickly, which was legitimized by pointing to its mass character. Imported popular culture such as tabloids, private TV channels, fast fashion, new ageism, various freedoms and rights etc., while locally developed, still contributed in certain ways to the precipitous move toward populist governments and nationalism. 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 last decades. One of the consequences of that can be the unexpected explosion of muted racism and matters of avoidance.

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