

## Introduction to the theme of the issue

# Gendering Socialist Popular Cultures

Sabina Mihelj  
Reana Senjković

Although gender relations and the position of women in state socialism constitute a fairly well established field of scholarly enquiry, existing literature only rarely ventures into the realm of popular culture. This thematic issue aims to fill a part of this gap by providing a selection of case studies from Central and Eastern Europe. Women's emancipation was an important goal of communist revolutionary projects virtually everywhere; communist authorities granted women a range of political, civic and economic rights, including the right to abortion, paid maternity leave, state-funded child-care facilities and economic independence. These changes had a knock-on effect on women's involvement in media production. As Beata Hock's survey of the Hungarian film industry shows, the number of women involved in behind-the-screen positions such as script writer, storyline editor and director was rising steadily through much of the socialist period, reaching a peak in the late 1980s before decreasing again in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hock's reading of selected films also shows that socialist gender policies, and the resulting changes in film production and consumption, had important implications for the nature of cinematic representations of women, and stimulated the production of complex, sympathetic portrayals of women characters.

Given the rate of women's employment under state socialism, it is not a surprise that the figure of the working woman featured prominently across a range of media forms and genres. An echo of that is found also in the Czechoslovak television series *The Woman behind the Counter* (1977), which centres on the life of a middle-aged, hard-working shop assistant Anna Holubová. As demonstrated in the contribution authored by Jakub Machek, Anna embodies the ideal of an independent, self-confident socialist woman-worker. Obviously, we should beware of accepting these self-congratulatory images of women's liberation at face value. While providing extensive support for women's participation in the labour force, communist policies rarely questioned the unequal distribution of labour in the private sphere, thus leaving women with the 'double burden' of both unpaid domestic work and full-time paid work outside the home. Popular culture provided an ideal terrain where these tensions could be played out and naturalised. As Machek

shows in his analysis, ‘the counter lady’ is not only a successful and dedicated worker, but also a loving mother and tireless housewife, who carries her ‘double burden’ of work and family duties with confidence and pride – in short, a true socialist ‘superwoman’.

Popular representations of sexuality in socialist states call for a similarly critical reading. As Biljana Žikić points out in her contribution, the legal definition of pornography in Tito’s Yugoslavia was rather unclear, and left substantial room for manoeuvre. While nude images were certainly not universally approved, a sufficient proportion of the socialist establishment was willing to tolerate them, or even concede that they might have educational and liberating potential. As Žikić shows, the interpretation of female nudity as progressive, and hence entirely compatible with socialist values, provided a handy tool for legitimising the publication of soft pornography. The editors and journalists of *Start*, a popular magazine known for its provocative political commentaries, insisted that their photographs of naked women were aesthetically pleasing, educational and sexually liberating, and presented a challenge to traditional bourgeois morality and the power of the Church. In this manner, soft pornography could be passed off as a constitutive feature of socialist modernity.

Anna Magó-Maghiar’s analysis of illustrated jokes published in the Hungarian satirical magazine *Ludas Matyi* shares important similarities with the discourses examined by Žikić. She highlights a similar confluence of libertarian attitudes and sexist imagery as well as the conspicuous use of female nudity as a visual icon of social criticism. Yet the young, fatally attractive young women are not the only female figures appearing in *Ludas Matyi*’s sexist jokes; they are often accompanied by the old, unattractive and bossy housewives. As Anna Magó-Maghiar argues, these two types of women constitute a variation on the well-known sexist division of women into asexual, sanitized wives and mothers, and the sexually appealing yet morally disgraced young sex symbols. In her view, the Hungarian state’s tolerance for such imagery actually constituted a part and parcel of the socialist sexual contract, through which the socialist regime sought to buy the patience of its male citizens by tolerating men’s exploitation of women’s bodies.

These four contributions elucidate only some of the intersections between socialist popular culture, gender and sexuality. We hope that the topics discussed here will stimulate others working in the field and thus help us achieve a better understanding of cross-regional similarities and differences in this area. To conclude, we would like to thank the COST A30 network *East of West: Setting a New Central and Eastern European Media* for their support with organising a workshop that gave rise to this thematic issue.