

‘The Counter Lady’ as a Female Prototype: Prime Time Popular Culture in 1970s and 1980s Czechoslovakia

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SUMMARY

TV serials became the most important genre of the popular culture in Czechoslovakia during the period of so-called normalisation – the 1970s and the 1980s. The new post invasion regime shifted the propagandistic emphasis to the popular culture sphere and thus TV serials became a space, where the conscientiously controlled dominant ideology met the mindsets and opinions of the audience. The paper deals with the role of popular culture in the late socialist society, particularly its participation in the process of reaching a consensus between the communist authorities and subordinated citizens. How the consensus was created through a restricted consumer lifestyle is discussed. Adding to this is shown the institutional frame of the popular culture’s production and function. It is related to the fundamental question of the applicability of cultural studies concepts and theories to the situation of socialist societies. The remainder of the paper focuses attention on the analysis of one of the most popular period TV serials ‘Žena za pultem’ in a broader period context as a useful tool to study gender relations represented by a period idea of socialist emancipation. It shows the division of characters and the function of communist festivities as examples of a manifested larger system of cultural beliefs mediated in the serials. The final part emphasises Žena za pultem as a typical soap opera with its characteristics that introduces an ideal world, where all significant inadequacies experienced in day-to-day living are solved. The main character of the TV serials represents an ideal socialist woman to promote the conception of the socialist way of women’s emancipation. The role of the both genders is discussed in closing.

Key words: popular culture, serials, gender, soap opera, socialist woman

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“Our party during four short years, supported by millions of workers, has lead society to the present quiet, and I should say, sunny days, in which we can think about current problems, without dangers or worries about tomorrow or next week and such concerns as where and what kind of forces would be necessary to fight once more against.” Gustáv Husák, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, 1973.

TV serials played a substantial role in Czechoslovakia during the period of so-called *normalisation* –which was put in practise within the 1970s and 1980s. It was often described as the cult of TV serials. They became the most important genre of *normalisation*'s popular culture. Their pushing was brought about by the decision of the new post invasion regime to shift the propagandistic emphasis from an enthusiastic *socialist realism* to the popular culture sphere. The production of TV serials increased remarkably if compared to the beginnings of the 1960s. In addition, they became an interface via which the conscientiously controlled dominant ideology met the mindsets and opinions of the audience.

My work has two major aims. The first one deals with the role of popular culture in late socialist society, particularly its participation in the process of reaching a consensus between the governing minority and subordinated majority. This is connected with the fundamental question of the applicability of cultural study concepts and theories to the situation of socialist societies of CEE countries.

The second serves as a kind of case study. It is focused on the analysis of one of the most popular period TV serials ‘*Žena za pultem*’ in a broader period context, thus providing a useful tool to study gender relationships represented by the then contemporary idea of socialist emancipation.

The structure of the paper evolves accordingly. The first part (*Popular culture and the social consensus*) provides introductory characteristics of the government and society of ‘*normalised*’ Czechoslovakia, the way of finding a consensus through a restricted consumer lifestyle, and its relationship to popular culture and its development. The next part (*Hegemony of the ‘normalization’ era*) discusses the ideological context of the ‘*normalized*’ world under the perspective of the above mentioned concept of hegemony, which proved to be useful for describing the socialist regime. Convinced of a similarity in the workings of the popular culture on both sides of the cold war front, I move on to the theoretical section (*Watching a popular TV show*), discussing the ways of possible interpretations of TV serials by the period audience and what the outcome may have been.

The case analysis starts with the part ('*Žena za pultem*' as a soap opera). First I focus on the overall characteristics of the popular TV serial which carries on the implication of character division and the function of communist festivities as examples of a manifested larger system of cultural beliefs mediated in the serials (*TV serials as a citizen's guide to real socialism*). The next part emphasises the typical soap opera characteristics of *Žena za pultem* which provided (not only female) viewers with a sort of escapism by bringing them into an ideal world where all significant inadequacies experienced in day-to-day life are resolved (the *Utopia of socialist abundance*). Finally the last part (*Counter ladies and men at town halls*) introduces a vision of socialist emancipation and spotlights the ideal socialist woman represented by the main character of the TV serial. This ideal concept is supplemented by a broader context derived from feminist studies about gender relations in so-called *real socialist* society. The role of the both genders is discussed then.

The purpose of my paper is to study the process of creating a consensus in the society. John Storey suggests analysing a negotiation on three different levels – audience, text and institution. (Storey, 2003: 80)

The only way to study an audience directly- some kind of ethnographical research – I do not find too productive in this case. The recollections of TV shows of the period would be heavily overlaid by all the changes that have come about from then up to now in the political system and society and by new related discourses. Memories are always mediated phenomena, they are structured, represented, and used in a social setting. (Kansteiner, 2002: 190) Thus I just could approximate the media studies conclusions about people's reception of popular culture in the pluralist systems to the real socialist ones.

Textual analysis reveals how the text tries to embody ideology into reader's understandings of their own desires, identities and expectations. Stories which are told via a media narrative are showing us how contradictions and conflicts in society come about and how they are resolved as well as telling us moral stories about the good of a society. Narratives in popular culture exhibit a type of resolution arrived at narratively through the personalities, relationships and actions of characters. (Thwaites – Davis – Mules, 2002: 172, 175), which are a part of present analysis. In the '*Žena za pultem*' serial, I am looking for several points: desired norms presented, values and sanctions, how the reality of the life in the real socialism is mimicked, notions of power relations, as well as assumptions about what is natural and right and for binaries and oppositions that structure the dominant understanding of world.

The integration of the broader period context derived from the secondary literature helped me to find lapses and distortions in the text, its silences and contradictions,

omissions by the authors and censors, as well as to understand the institutional frame of popular culture's production and function in 'normalised' Czechoslovakia.

Popular culture and the social consensus

During the era of socialism in Czechoslovakia the communist regime dealt with popular culture in different ways. Throughout the initial period of the hard-line Stalinist regime, the new cultural elite followed the previous policy against popular culture formed in late 1930s and during WWII. Janáček refers to that in terms of the 'operation of elimination' and the 'operation of displacement'. Popular culture was seen as harmful and after WWII officially restricted. After the takeover in 1948 the new regime tried to eliminate both the popular and elite culture and displaced them by developing a new unifying culture for everyone: *social realism*, consisting of a mix of the soviet pattern, folk and 19th century national culture. (Janáček, 2004: 63, 229) But this attempt almost faded away during the time of less restricted attitudes in the late 1950s and 1960s, and popular culture developed in mostly similar ways as those in western societies (e.g. rock'n'roll music, TV shows).

There was a small attempt to restore the *social realism* of the old manner after the Soviet invasion in 1968, but new communist authorities readily decided to rely on popular culture and restricted consumerism to create people's acceptance of the status quo, rather than to force them to enthusiastically follow the renewed regime. Most significant for the situation of 1970s and 1980s was the escape to "a private domain". Although people still had to participate in some communist rituals and ceremonies, the pivot of their lives were their private activities, most reflected in the phenomenon of *weekenders*. They would leave towns early on Fridays, heading for their cottages and country-side houses. There they would consume their time and energy in the building and improving of their recreational houses. Despite still present restriction of private property, the authorities showed almost no reaction to such ostentatious displays of materialism and consumerism. Paulina Bren offers reasons for the regime's unspoken consent. Seeking some sort of consensus with the public, communist authorities decided to improve the standard of living and to satisfy, in part, people's material needs.

"The regime allowed its citizens a modicum of self-realization within the area of consumption as a compensation for the lack of independence permitted in politics. [...] Citizens were encouraged to define and locate themselves in a private world, one that was at the time being replicated by others

around them, thus offering the pretence of public life while avoiding its dangers" (Bren, 2002: 126, 127)

By promoting a culture of *weekenders* owning recreational houses, the communists created a sort of middle-class settlement instead of building the proclaimed proletarian society. Bren compares this effort even to Reagan's America and the infantilization of citizens.

Political stability was achieved by submitting to the demands of the private sphere and by the resignation of any attempt to mobilize people in the building of socialism. This improved living standard was promoted as an achievement of socialism. The subdued interest in any political or economical alternative to the existing system, enabled thanks to material prosperity as a symbol of the fulfilment of life, brought strong stability to the Czechoslovak regime after 1968. (Holý, 2001: 33, 34)

"By the 1970s, official communist culture no longer promoted a nation of eager, publicly active communists. Instead, it sought to create a nation of private persons joined together in their mutual quest for the good life, which, the regime insisted, could best be had under communism." (Bren, 2002: 136)

Probably the prime popular cultural phenomena of the so-called '*normalisation*' period were the TV serials. Streets and restaurants were empty at the time of their premiere broadcast, the amount of people watching some of them would occasionally reach 80-90 percent of the whole population (Smetana, 2000: 35).

The popularity and thus propagandistic importance of TV serials was recognized soon after the beginning of TV broadcasting in 1950s. It was due to a lack of ideological pressure during 1960s that the golden age of this genre in Czechoslovakia blossomed in the 1970s. In order to attract a wide audience, TV serials mostly dealt with family and interpersonal relationships. Similar to the western model. The serials were carefully planned, Czechoslovak TV put together an official rundown of themes and ideas every year. It contained all prepared programmes which were reviewed and approved by the ideological board of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. The shows were prepared to coincide with a variety of important socialist anniversaries, or presented political events such as elections, party congresses, and so on. The Committee detailed the serials' themes and environment (agriculture, the forces, municipality, construction, high school etc.) in accordance with the current propagandistic needs. Each created show was continuously reviewed by a mass media board of the Cen-

tral Committee, which altered individual lines in the script, casting, and also shot material. (Cysařová, 1998: 86) Generally, there was a knotty tangle of censorship, self-censorship and supervision over the shows shot.

This period was also remarkable for an antithetic popular culture phenomenon, leading from ideological pressure. This so-called *Domáci umění* (Home-made Art) – widespread artefacts made by the general public in order to decorate their homes – was found in almost every household. Widely imitated artefacts, patterns and procedures, initially invented by an anonymous originator, spread throughout the whole republic. From hand to hand and independent of any market or commercial production.

The hegemony of the ‘normalization’ era

In order to study artefacts of the 1970s and 1980s popular culture in Czechoslovakia, it is necessary to answer the following question: Is it possible to use concepts and theories of cultural studies to explore the role of popular culture in a socialist society?

According to Althusser, the ideology consists of lived, everyday practises – rituals, customs and patterns of behaviour, ways of thinking – reproduced through the practices and productions of Ideological State Apparatuses, i.e. education, organized religion, the media, family, culture industries and so on. (Storey, 2001: 102) The ideology can be seen also as a product of discourse, a particular mode of knowing the world through signs and texts. The production of the text is the process of meditation whereby institutions efface their own interests in favour of an apparently commonsensical and consensual stance. The reader is addressed by the text as if it already agrees, whether or not his actual reading is dominant, negotiated or oppositional. Ideology represents the social implication of the phatic effects of discourse. (Thwaites – Davis – Mules, 2002: 158-160)

In Gramsci’s conception there is a flow of dominant meanings in every culture, which in certain moments, attempt to achieve dominance. Gramsci describes: the process of the creation, maintenance and reproduction of these authoritative meanings – ideologies and practices, as hegemony. Due to continuous negotiation, created as an amalgamation of a variety of aims and wishes into a common interpretation of the world, such cultural and social unity is formed, which serves as a basis for a widespread social approval of ruling group. (Barker, 2006: 65) Gramsci has not intended his conception of hegemony just for pluralist countries. He defines the state as dictatorship plus hegemony. The state is constituted by political society plus civil society, that is hegemony armoured by coercion. Ruling classes not only justify and maintain their domination but also succeed in obtaining the

active consent of the governed. Thus individual societies should be analysed in terms of the balance between (and specific manifestations of) these two types of social control, hegemony and domination. (Femia, 1981: 28,29)

Hence the situation in Central and East European Countries during the era of socialism, could be described in Gramsci's terms. The communist regime in the Czechoslovakia of 1950s is approximated by some sociologists as an oligarchic type of two-tier model with citizens on the one side and the Communist party on the other side. In this model, "the smaller circle of players on the upper level is very superior in strength to the larger circle on the lower level. Nevertheless, the interdependence of the two circles imposes limitations on every player, even on those on the upper level. Even a player on the upper level in a position of a really great strength has less scope for controlling the course of the game." (Vajdová, 2003: 75)

During the 1960s and again in the 1970s, the process of power reduction differentials between the Communist party and ordinary people proceeded, as it is possible to demonstrate by official documents too. A new equilibrium was settled there, which gave less power chances to the upper level than was possible within the early 1950s. (Ibid: 75, 79)

'Normalised' Czechoslovakia and Western societies could be described in a similar way. In both systems, the hegemony is reached because the power relationships tend to emerge through the process of consent rather than coercion or force and the authority of dominant group is gained by the consent of subordinated citizens. (Thwaites – Davis – Mules, 2002: 165, 169). In comparison with more plural western political systems, the communist regime with its strictly watched and maintained unilateral ideology was in a stronger need of a repressive state apparatus to secure its authority and ideological dominance. However, compared to the Stalinist 1950s, the post invasion authorities needed to rely on seeking a compromise between their renewed ideology along with the values and beliefs of the subordinated masses, rather than only on repression. The late real socialism rule is described in the way that "the revolutionary myth in particular lost its vanishing point in communism and state terror was not public." For the leading role of the authorities, the trade-off of private advantages for loyalty became important. As a result of a broadly accepted agreement, anyone loyal to the regime could take part in the universal socialist conveniences, be active in the re/distribution processes, consisting in official and unofficial shares. (Kabele, 2002: 67)

Reifová tried to explain the ideological dimension of the system with Bourdieu's notion of political capital. Inequality in access to ruling positions in western societies was based on the privileged access to economical (cultural or educational) capital. In Czechoslovakia however, that was not the case. The guaranteed access

to political capital, which was used as a tool of achieving symbolic wealth and privileges, was derived from Czechoslovak socialist constitution. Reifová assumes “that this conception may become a cornerstone of the formula, explaining the position from which the communist elites could assert it and keep its ideology.” (Reifová, 2006: 12; Reifová 2007: 380) Power was concentrated in the hands of a few people – only around 10 percent of population were reported to have any influence on the decision-making process (and only 25 percent of communist party members). The survey from 1967 showed that most people tended to perceive this society divided into the elite and the masses and not into the official three non-antagonistic socialist classes of workers, peasants and working intelligentsia. (Holý, 2001: 27, 28)

Watching a popular TV show

Cultural studies consider popular culture to be a central space of the ideological battle, marked by both resistance and incorporation, where the negotiation of common meanings takes place, where a compromise between the ideology of the dominant class and values and beliefs of subordinated groups is sought. (Storey, 2001: 105) And an important field of this negotiation is the popular format of TV serials. John Fiske describes typical TV watching a process of negotiation between the (televisual) text and its variously socially situated readers. (Fiske, 1987: p. 64)

“Popularity is a measure of a cultural form’s ability to serve the desires of its customers. [...] For a cultural commodity to be popular, then, it must be able to meet the various interests of the people amongst whom it is popular as well as the interests of its producers.” (Ibid: p. 310)

People are able to read meanings in a completely different mode from the one which was encoded by originators. They contrive to understand the included ideology in an entirely opposite way. Nevertheless, as scholars of cultural studies claim, the majority of viewers ‘read’ the negotiated code. It corresponds to their common interpretation of the world, i.e. a compromise between the propagated ideology of the dominant group and the values of the common person’s everyday life. Those who tend to ‘read’ the negotiated code understand adequately what has been dominantly defined, but their decoding contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements. They accept the dominant ideology in general, but modify it to meet the needs of their specific situation. (Hall, 2006: 172) The prevailing negotiated readings of Czechoslovak TV serials can be shown by the fact that also underground musicians, trying to work and live outside of the regime’s limits and

restraints and thus periodically punished and imprisoned, were carefully watching popular serials together in pubs. (H. Zimmerhaklová, April 2009: personal communication)

Wulf Kansteiner ponders over how to handle dominant meanings found in popular media content. The structural characteristics of the dominant media correlates to some extent with the perspectives of its users, but "if it can be shown that specific representations found large audiences and faced little competition from other media", which TV serials on Czech TV during 'normalisation' period did, "it might be permissible to conclude that consistent and persistent lacunae and gaps in coverage are difficult to overcome independently by the audience and might therefore find their way into their minds." (Kansteiner, 2002: 194) Thus the complexity and subtlety of meanings encoded in the televisual text has a powerful effect upon the readers. The dominant definitions maintain their privileged positions and the negotiating reading, the decoded mix of adaptive and oppositional elements, tends to be inconsistent and often incoherent. The wide variety of codes coheres to present a unified set of meanings that work to maintain, legitimate, and naturalize the dominant ideology. (Fiske, 1987: 13)

Hence we can explore the meanings and overall organisation of period TV serials as an encoded ideology, which correlate to some extent to the perspectives of its users. The world of '*normalisation*' TV serial production was based on the notion that mass media shall normatively construct the social reality, following a conception given by the authorities. Serials were trusted as the most effective tool for the required process of the socialization of their audience (and thus the public as a whole) to norms, values and sanctions of life in real socialism. (Reifová, 2002: 359) Because of their significant popularity, period TV serials offered viewers everyday discourse and an understanding of surrounding world. The popular program helped to naturalize desired meanings, a value system and manners through encoded ideological messages. People did not necessarily need to believe the described content, but serials showed them examples both of desired behaviour, which was rewarded, and the undesired, which was sanctioned. The serials worked as a kind of a socialist exemplum.

The main aim of these serials was to show the audience the set of values appropriate for an un-conflicting life in 'real socialism' and ways they can deal with them. As Reifová noticed, the settings of the serials, varied from agricultural to military, from primary to university education and from municipal to police force, can be seen "as an attempt to apply desirable norms of conformism to representations of as many social sectors as possible." (Reifová, 2008: 302)

TV serials, whether produced by competing media in pluralist countries or by TV companies managed by socialist authorities, are filled with preferred meanings. In

comparison with the dominant ideology of mass media, more unconsciously encoded, and with more open and wider possibilities of the selection for audience in West, in socialist countries, party representatives restricted the selection and conscientiously supervised the meanings. However, I presume the effect was the same, that was a negotiation of meanings and resulting in hegemony as a kind of unconscious compromise on which a consensus in the society was based.

Thanks to their popularity, TV serials were used as an important tool for creating consent within the society of the *normalization* period. When studying the Czechoslovak popular culture of *normalisation* period or its most successful genre -TV serials, one gains not only an insight into the character of later socialist society, the way of life and everyday practices of viewers but also into the way the relative stability of communist regime was created.

‘Žena za pultem’ as a soap opera

‘*Žena za pultem*’ (The counter lady) first appeared on screens in 1977 – written by Jaroslav Dietl, directed by Jaroslav Dudek. It was a part of a huge wave of TV serials during the second half of the 1970s, which definitely established a significant role of this genre in the Czech society. The enormous popularity of TV serial production in Czechoslovakia came about for same reason as it was in more pluralist countries with a less restricted TV market. A successful, popular product may gain an audience from a variety of different environments and backgrounds since it offers a possibility to project onto the viewers its own meanings and values, corresponding to their social situation. Besides American production spreading worldwide, it was also the case of several Czech TV serials, which were able to succeed in the more competitive Western German market, where they managed to captivate the audience in a completely different social and political situation. It is a manifestation of their genre quality and it also goes some way to explain their popularity in both *normalized* Czechoslovakian and contemporary Czech society.

As in other serials, *Žena za pultem* focused on a specific environment – in this case the location was a typical, everyday small food store known as a ‘*samoobsluha*’. There was another intention in this particular case too. A female working group and all their problems were placed in the centre of the serials. This proved to be an ideal setting for a typical soap opera. According to Christina Geraghty, three female oriented genres – romance, women’s film and a prime time soap opera have a common characteristic:

“the emphasis is on the central woman protagonist(s) whom the reader is invited to support and whose reasons for action are understood by the audience, although not necessarily by the male characters. In all three, there is a division between the public and the private sphere, male and female spaces respectively, and the woman’s pre-eminence in the narrative is based on her understanding and control of the emotional area. ... Within the three genres, physical action tends not to be the motivating force in the narrative, instead the emphasis is on the building up and maintenance of a relationship in which the verbal expression of feeling or indeed the withholding of such expression is crucial to the resolution.” (Geraghty, 2006: 248)

All these characteristics are valid for ‘the Woman’. There is but one exception. The differences between the public and the private sphere cannot be described as the male space versus the female one – more on this further.

During the 12 episodes of the serial, 12 months from January to December, the life of *Anna Holubová*, a female shop assistant, was played out. The story starts after her relocation both to a new flat and a new work place, being freshly divorced. She decides to change the place where she worked as a store manager to another, closer to her new lodgings. All this in spite of the bitter fact that her new post is just that of an ordinary shop assistant. She takes on this change in order to find more time to care for her two children, a small boy and a teenage daughter. Throughout the episodes we watch the slow development of her new relationship and problems with her ex-husband and children. Simultaneously each episode is focuses on the stories of other, predominantly female shop assistants. They are usually connected with relationship problems as well. Even when an episode is focuses on a male protagonist, the root of his trouble is his non-male gender position, subordinated relationship (a pensioner oppressed by his children, a son behaving against his father’s will, a deputy manager oppressed by his wife, etc...).

The serial achieved immense popularity. It is considered one of the most popular serials of *normalisation* TV. The actress starring had been highly unpopular before the serials were shown. It was due to her active membership in the communist party. It might have been a result of her casting as well which was arranged by the “high party posts” allegedly against the will of the serial’s creators. However, the popularity of the serials extended to the point where she even became accepted by the public. (Szabó, 2007: 269) ‘The Counter Lady’ was at the same time one of those serials, which gained popularity on west German TV too, although its focus on socialist retail issues makes it hard to believe. The main reason was probably its soap opera quality. Thanks to the plotline of human stories, it was able to predominate over the propaganda aimed at the domestic audience.

TV serials as a citizen's guide to real socialism

In the following part, I want to focus on closely interconnected questions.

1. How could a genre like Czechoslovak 1970s and 1980s TV serials, so directed and controlled reach such immense popularity?
2. How were the preferred meanings organized?
3. How could the perspective of audience be influenced by them?

The following aspects are considered as significant examples of manifested larger system of cultural beliefs mediated in the TV serials. The authorities tried to efface by them their own interest in favour of an apparently commonsensical and consensual stance. (Thwaites – Davis – Mules, 2002: 159)

The basic orientation in a soap opera's story is provided by the portrayal of its characters. Their allocation among good, bad and hesitant ones as in the in *socialist realism* of the 1950s corresponds to the conventions of soap operas too. However, all communists are depicted as popular, obliging and likeable ordinary persons (with the exception of characters later proving to have been bad guys accompanied by a skeleton in the cupboard), the good ones do not necessarily need to be party members in the serials of the *normalisation* period. Proper behaviour in accord with life norms in the socialist society – a model of a character good enough for people to possibly identify with. Such a character would be then “rewarded” by the development of the story line. However, some kind of communist superiority remained, as can be seen in *Žena za pultem*. All truly willing, helpful and concerned characters are naturally party members, including Anna, although her party membership is not overly emphasized. This observation confirms the propagandistic importance of period TV serials over other genres. For example, there is usually no relevance of good characters and party membership in the film production of the same period.

On the contrary, the bad and hesitant characters are people with some sort of an anti-socialist attitude, mostly recognized by a residue of petty bourgeois manners. Here we observe the desire for wealth, luxury, power and higher social status. Their aloof and arrogant behaviour highlights their negative attitude. Only hesitant protagonists can change themselves and come to the proper way of life and happiness, whereas the bad ones are mocked (rather than sanctioned) within the *normalisation* period of production. The depiction created not only by the serials, but by most popular productions of this period, tends to present bad characters as confused or influenced by petty bourgeois manners. They are more to be laughed at than punished but definitely not as severely as in the 1950s (with less numerous exceptions of emigrants and dissidents in crime production). The work of ideology to include ‘us’ and exclude ‘them’ gain a specific quality in the period production.

There is almost no division between the addressed 'us' and represented 'them', but it creates an amalgam of all of us, who have some imperfections, with everyone being respected in the united and homogenised society, where everyone can improve their bad habits.

The depicted society with almost no real bad persons is probably an outcome of the situation where most of the people grew up in socialism, brought up by the socialist society, yet they could be lead astray by some residuals of past, not by bad dispositions as in cases of the real bourgeois villains of bygone times. As shown above, the regime was looking for an overall consensus, not the class struggle of the 1950s.

Irena Reifová, provides an interesting observation of character allocation. She studied later (1980s) TV serials *Synové a dcery Jakuba Skláře* ('Sons and Daughters of Jacob, the Glassworker'), written and directed by the same authors as *Žena*, a kind of televisual chronicle covering sixty years of workers movement in the 20th century. In the serials, the central category which allocates good and bad characters is not a distance or proximity to the communist ideas, but to what extent characters are guided by their good interior (good ones) and how much are they interested in exterior or superficial attributes (bad ones). (Reifová, 2006: 38) The same feature may be observed in two of Anna's closest colleagues. Jiřina from the vegetable section is a young, shy and stuttering girl, looking for love. She is characterized by her inner qualities – a hardworking, initiative and active member of the socialist youth organisation. Thanks to Anna's brokering she becomes the "forewoman" of her section. This promotion to such a post gives her more self-confidence. Another character, Olinka from the delicatessen section, is a hesitant character, a bit morally lax, largely concerned about fashion and dating a quantity of attractive guys – under the influence of her parents, a typical petty bourgeoisie family. But her good interior (with help from Anna) prevails and she finally decides to marry an older professor, instead of a young, handsome but irresponsible biker.

Žena za pultem thoroughly utilized the range of its form. A chronicle of one year in the life of ordinary shop assistants was meant to represent the important world of festivities in *real socialism* all year round. It allows showing and propagating the complete range of communist rituals and ceremonies integrated into a traditional set of domestic festivities. However, even traditional festivities, were marked by lasting efforts to free them from their Christian background. Either by adding to them new atheist meanings, or renewing the old, pagan ones – e.g. Christmas as a holiday of peace and love among people, Easter as a holiday of springtime. Other ways included the substituton of the Christian transitional or initiatory rituals by new ones (e.g. welcoming new citizens instead of baptism).

These were often connected with ceremonial entries into different stages of socialist youth organizations (the '*jiskra*' and *pioneer* organization oaths substituting Christian confirmation). The serials showed how people enjoyed these rituals and festivities and how were they important in the protagonists' life, mixing the popular familial ones (Christmas, Easter, weddings) with official forced festivities (the Labour day, the Anniversary of the Russian October Revolution or oath in youth organizations) to achieve the illusion of the same importance in peoples lives. The welcoming of new citizens proved remarkably successful, considering the fact, that is still commonly practised by every local and municipal authority (Kundera depicts it nicely in his *Žert* (The Joke), an insightful observation of the 1950s/1960s Czechoslovak reality).

The Utopia of socialist abundance

There were two predominant goals set by *Žena's* authors: to show successful female emancipation in socialist society along with presenting the main heroine as an exemplary of socialist woman. The remaining, mainly female collective of the supermarket employees served as a conduit for displaying other female attitudes, values, beliefs and ways of life, more or less different from Anna's exemplary versions. Viewers were able to choose the one closest to them to identify with, and producers could expose how different manners contribute either to a success or failure, i.e. which behaviour is considered positive and worth following and which is not preferred. The lesson the viewers were supposed to learn was not really related to direct watching, as to subsequent discussions, both in immediate family, and in working or other collectives. As Christina Geraghty mentioned, "The pleasure of soaps are so much bound up with speculation and analysis that they demand that viewers share the experience. The narrative strategies are dependent on audiences' capacity to predict and evaluate characters' actions so that there is a common participation in the problems being portrayed and the variety of solutions on offer. ... Discussion of soap operas also involves sharing ideas on personal relationships and emotional dilemmas. ... In such situations, soaps can be used to establish a common perspective or negotiate difficult situations in a way which would not have been possible had the fictional crises occurred in real life." (Geraghty, 2006: 251)

A notion of the function of women's fiction for its consumers is also offered by Geraghty. She argues that these genres enable their readers to imagine an ideal world, with emphasis on fantasy and escapism, through the creation of "utopias, in which values associated within a personal sphere are dominant." (Geraghty, 2006: 246) Geraghty developed Richard Dyer's observation, that "what entertainment

offers is not a representation of what an ideal world might be like but what it would feel like. ... Entertainment thus offers the experience of a different world, one which is escapist precisely because it is based on the inadequacies experienced in day-to-day life“ (Geraghty, 2006: 247) This function was the same with soap operas (and the entire popular culture) in socialist countries as in the West. Geraghty continues with a comparison of how various inadequacies are fulfilled in British and US soaps and other women's fiction genres. Some of them are useful for observation of the “universe” of *Žena za pultem* and the female roles found there.

In US soaps, the problem of the unequal distribution of property is solved by the “spectacle of abundance through the emphasis on sensuous luxury. ... Basic necessities are transformed into luxuries by their endless availability.” (Geraghty, 2006: 250). This abundance doesn't so extravagantly figure in British soaps. In socialist *Žena* it figures in a specific way. The setting of the serials is a store, a place packed with contradictions in every socialist country – a place of consumption, a showcase of the achieved successes of the socialist economy and thus a place of constant short supply. The imaginary store represents the ideal socialist store. The audience could enjoy the uncommon abundance in a shop full of desirable goods in the same way as they watched rarely broadcasted western movies. People from the countryside could have believed that there really was a store like this, somewhere in Prague, as there were well-known differences in goods between Prague and the regions.

The notion of the store filled with goods was supplemented with accommodating, smiling shop assistants. Mostly satisfied customers would bring them their family lunch to taste as a reward or in return: “An astonished Customer: ‘Oh, do you have two kinds of curd?’ a Shop assistant: ‘No, three.’” Whole series was interlaced with long, lingering shots of a variety of products, combining the staples (bread, jam, milk, ...) with scarcer foodstuffs (tropical fruits, fresh vegetables, caviar, a wide choice of meat, ...). American anthropologists, describing the relationship of Czechs to food, even write about a feast of fetishistic imagery, about pornographic images of food displayed, sliced, and handled which attracted an audience living within an environment of consumerist deficiency. (Passmore – Passmore, 2003: 38, 39) This propagandistic effort may also explain why Anna worked in the delicatessen section – with lots of luxury foodstuffs surrounding her, the camera is especially fascinated by the pyramids of tinned caviar. As John Fiske notes, utopia could be popular only, if it contains a substantial element of everyday reality. Groundbreaking ideals could never achieve widespread popularity, because they lack the lines of relevance to everyday social realities. (Fiske, 1992: 145) Therefore socialist abundance is not comparable to the American version. It merely

reached a level, imaginable by the audience. Similarly the alacrity and diligence of the shop assistants in an ideal grocery store with five cash desks and three freezers has such limits which would probably today result in their dismissal.

Counter ladies and men at town halls

Anna, the shop assistant embodies the ideal of an independent and self-confident socialist woman, who is able to manage simultaneously a full-time job, children and an impractical husband as well. All of this is due to her aptitudes and to the help and support of socialist society. Because of the increasing divorce rate from the middle of the 1970s, one of the serial's key tasks was to portray Anna as model of correct behaviour as became a single woman with children, this largely being to familiarize the public with an ever more commonly occurring phenomenon and to show how the progress made by socialist development facilitated the situation of single women with children.

In fact, it was appropriate and important for the overall majority of women (single, married or divorced) in socialist Czechoslovakia to simultaneously manage a family and keep up a full-time job. The percentage of economically active women increased from 44 in 1961 to 47 in 1971, and markedly overcame their share in northern European and the closest western (more resembling) countries such as Austria and Germany which recorded something between 30 and 40 percent. (Kalinová, 2007: 287) This situation wasn't brought about by low female self-esteem or attained emancipation. It was pure necessity. Securing the family only from one salary was almost impossible. Despite a guaranteed (and subsidised) two-year maternity leave, it was common to start work earlier in order to balance the family income. The state set up a dense network of nursery schools for children of an early age, the insufficient capacity of which (brought on by the 1970s population) was one of the most dwelled period lack.

Hence a corollary task of '*Žena*' was to present feasible, female, self-reliance – the female of self-worth and dignity. Anna is very proud of her new life without a husband and of all the transitions she experiences. Her mother does not consider Anna's childcare adequate and so prepares dinner for them before Anna comes home from work. Anna gets very angry because it is a matter of her female pride to manage everything without help from others, (except the state – offered services).

A useful introduction to the issue of gender relations in socialist Czechoslovakia is a study by Ivan Vodochodský, where he summarises existing sociological interpretations of 'gender under communism'. Communist states of Central and Eastern Europe tried to create new socialist people, without any social, or even gender

differences. As a result, women were primarily defined as workers too. The regime's concern in labour forces was promoted as the socialist way of women's emancipation. So the most important task was to set women free from the necessity of nurturing children by the building a sufficient network of nurseries and kindergartens. Women of real socialism became thus economically and socially independent as well as educated and qualified. However, the traditional unilateral division of household care stayed untouched. (Vodochodský, 2008a) Consequently the concurrency of full time jobs and housework resulted in women having about three hours per day shorter leisure time in comparison to men and their average income was 30 percent lower, as they worked on less qualified and less prestigious posts. (Holý, 2001: 149) With the assistance of education and political campaigns however, these differences were considered alterable in the future. The production of '*Žena za pultem*' was probably a part of this effort. (Vodochodský, 2008a)

Nevertheless, positive development began to stagnate from about 1960s. The authorities cut down on their ideas about the gender equality due to the exceedingly costly state help based on traditional female household duties, and worries over the decreasing birth rate. Thus the official discourse was changed from the idea of female emancipation to the support of mothers. (Ibid.)

Women did not feel their suppression as gendered, as something specifically female, thus they blamed their situation on the socialist system and not on men. (Ibid.) Holý assumes socialist reality took traditional domains from both men and women; men felt degraded as family providers and women as housewives, and both thus felt manipulated by the state in their most private spheres. (Holý, 2001: 149-153) Almost the same situation is described by Vodochodský too. (2008b)

Anna immediately becomes the centrepiece of the supermarket collective, thanks to her unflinching willingness to help others and to get involved into their lives of conflict. She is also courageously involved in sorting out problems in the workplace, not being afraid to risk conflict with her bosses. As a conscious party member, she is prepared to oppose any injustice in her surroundings, and pay special attention to the people in somewhat vulnerable positions, such as young women and senior citizens. As she says, "Nowadays no woman is in a situation to tolerate anything." In fact, she is able to help anyone with the exception of her bosses, who stand higher in the party hierarchy, which probably corresponds to their degree of wisdom and thus they can find help only from someone superior to them in the hierarchy. This broadly patriarchal configuration is seen for example in the episode featuring the boss's problems with his son, when the boss is advised by a certain character from the company headquarters, who appears infrequently within the storyline.

Another issue discussed in Geraghty's study is energy. "In the US prime time soaps, energy is expressed largely through the male characters or through the female characters who are operating within the public sphere. ... Energy in the British soaps, however, tends to be associated with female characters. Also, it is not expressed through business but through an active engagement in the public life of the community." (Geraghty, 2006: 249) In *Žena za pultem*, energy is connected with women too, especially with Anna, who is periodically involved both in the public and private sphere. There is a connection with the idea of a socialist society, where the public and private sphere should be fully merged. The *normalization* reality though knew quite the opposite practice of the employees' time, strictly divided into the public and private sphere. The private one was protected and the public one was considered a deprivation of the private one – and so working time was used to arrange private matters such as phone calls, shopping or just to save energy for private business. (Holý, 2001: 30)

Somehow then, the private sphere merged with the public one by absorbing it. This is the reason, why *Žena* as a soap is more connected with a typical public sphere, in terms of a both work location, and store. A socialist work place was often turned into a private sphere, rather than a public one. All private affairs had a place and time to be discussed or worked out there. Moreover, the feminized space of shops could not be connected with predominantly male public space. Yet, one important difference still remained. The store was always controlled by men, no matter how feminized it was, or how much even Anna was involved. When it came to final decisions, male managers would have the last word. The only area where women were to have a full control was the household.

There were other TV serials, although less popular, showing and promoting the world of men in decisive public roles. They introduced the *real socialist* decision making process. The most significant and outspoken were the following ones: *Muž na radnici*, 1976 (Man at the Town Hall) and *Okres na severu*, 1980 (The Northern District). Women were shown just as complements to the group of men constituting the local oligarchy.

The citizens of late *real socialist* Czechoslovakia found the activity in a steadily male dominated public sphere uninteresting and unpleasant. While the private, traditional female sphere, became the main shelter before the press of the socialist society, and the place of people's freedom. (Vodochodský, 2008b)

Exemplary space of female socialist emancipation depicted in *Žena za pultem* encompasses in fact no requirements for men. The household remained the domain of women. Men only have to respect their hard double-job and give flowers and chocolates on the Women's Day. All male characters are portrayed as very impractical persons, unable to take adequate care of themselves. As a result, they

look for wives to do it for them. Their only task, besides holding top positions in work or in the party hierarchy, is to own a car and drive their wives and girlfriends to and from their workplace.

The same situation in late socialist Czechoslovakia is described in studies of Czech feminists. Man, better paid and dominant in public, was like another child in the family – dependent, in need of solicitude and care. It constituted a paradox. On the one hand a society with men in power and inferior women, segregated positions, and on the other, society, where men are weakened in their traditional roles and supported by close women. (Vodochodský, 2008b)

Conclusion

The paper focuses on the phenomenon of the popular culture of Czechoslovakia during 1970s and 1980s. The new authorities of the *normalisation* period sought some sort of consent with the public through a restricted consumer lifestyle. It was in this manner that they decided to shift the propagandistic emphasis from an enthusiastic *socialist realism* to the sphere of popular culture. Gramsci's concept of hegemony together with the main concepts of Cultural studies could be profitably applied to the late *real socialism* of CEE countries, because as well as in western pluralist parts of the world, power relations tended to emerge through the process of consent rather than coercion or force and the authority of the dominant group was gained by the consent of subordinated citizens rather than by pure repression. Serials were believed to be the most effective tool in the required process of public socialization to norms, values and sanctions of life in *real socialism*. The meanings and overall organisation of very popular period TV serials correlated to some extent to the perspectives of its users and offered its viewers everyday discourse, for understanding the surrounding world. People did not necessarily need to believe the described content, but the serials showed them examples both of proper behaviour rewarded and its opposite, sanctioned.

Soap operas enabled their viewers to imagine an ideal world, a utopia based on the escape from the inadequacies experienced in everyday life. Another attraction for the audience were the various characters of serial's shop assistants, offered to the viewers as miscellaneous behavioural patterns, attitudes and values. The lesson the viewers learned from it was not so much connected with direct watching, as with subsequent discussions about motivations and strategies, which are an important element of the soap opera's reception.

The success of characters went down to their being either good or bad. Appropriate behaviour and no anti socialistic attitude were features ensuring the "good" label. As mentioned above, the antisocial attitude was mainly seen as the residue of

petty bourgeois manners. There were no real bad characters, just those confused or badly influenced. Since the authorities sought for an overall consensus and not the class struggle, all the people, especially brought up within socialism, could find the right socialist way of life.

The predominant aim of *Žena*'s authors was to show the achieved female emancipation in the socialist society and the main heroine as an exemplary socialist woman. She was portrayed as an example of an independent single woman with children whose behaviour was appropriate to that character profile. This could well have served a purpose, which was to show the progress made in support (not only) of single women with children.

Despite the proclaimed socialist emancipations of the 1960s, the official discourse was changed from emancipation to the support of mothers. Male dominance within the public sphere and their hold on more prestigious and better paid jobs remained.

However there is one issue, which is described almost similarly by current feminists as well as by period TV serials, promoting an ideal world of women's emancipation – men who became entirely dependent beings in the private sphere, in need of support from women.

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‘Žena za pultom’ kao ženski prototip: *prime-time*, popularna kultura Čehoslovačke 1970ih i 1980ih

Jakub Machek

SAŽETAK

Televizijske serije su u periodu tzv. Normalizacije u Čehoslovačkoj – 70. ih i 80. ih godina prošloga stoljeća, postale najvažniji žanr popularne kulture. Novi režim prebacio je propagandni naglasak na sferu popularne kulture čime su televizijske serije postale prostor u kojem se savjesno kontrolirana dominantna ideologija spajala sa razmišljanjem i stavovima publike. Ovaj rad bavi se ulogom popularne kulture u kasnom socijalističkom društvu, osobito njenim sudjelovanjem u procesu postizanja konsenzusa između komunističke vlasti i podređenih građana. Razmatra se kako je stvoren konsenzus kroz ograničen potrošački stil života. U prilog tomu prikazan je institucionalni okvir produkcije i funkcije popularne kulture. To je u svezi s fundamentalnim pitanjem primjenjivosti koncepta i teorija kulturnih studija na situaciju socijalističkih društava. Preostali dio rada pozornost stavlja na analizu jedne od najpopularnijih TV serija tog doba "Žena za pultom" koja u širem kontekstu vremena postaje koristan instrument za studiju spolnih relacija predstavljenih u stilskoj ideji socijalističke emancipacije. Prikazuju se podijele likova i funkcija komunističkih slavljaka kao primjeri većeg sustava kulturnih vjerovanja posredovanih u seriji. U zadnjem dijelu autor ističe "Ženu za pultom" kao tipičnu sapunicu s karakteristikama koje uvode u idealan svijet u kojem sve važnije poteškoće svakodnevnog života bivaju riješene. Glavni lik TV serije predstavlja idealnu socijalističku ženu, kako bi se promovirao koncept socijalističkog načina ženske emancipacije. Uloga oba spola razmatra se u završnom dijelu.

Ključne riječi: popularna kultura, serije, spol, sapunica, socijalistička žena