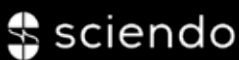


The West in the Soviet “Kingdom of Mirrors”: Entertainment of the Soviet Lithuanian Television in the Brezhnev era



TOMAS VAITELE, Vilnius University, Lithuania, e-mail: tomas.vaitele@if.vu.lt

ABSTRACT

A considerable part of Soviet television consisted of propaganda and ideology. However, when the new media emerged in then-occupied Lithuania, its development was limited by the Communist party on the one hand and influenced by Western radio broadcasts, Polish television production, and Western movies. This paper analyzes two unusual cases in Soviet Lithuanian television, which borrowed from and were indirectly yet highly influenced by their Western counterparts. The humorous TV series *Petraičių šeimoje* (1965–1972) and the four-part adventure movie *Tadas Blinda* (1972) were, and still are, some of the most popular TV productions from the Soviet period. Based on these examples, this study analyzes the influence of TV productions, as well as their popularity and relations with the ruling regime. Were they really considered Western in form and socialist in content or were they more a socialist form of national content? These questions are key in trying to determine the real purpose of these productions and their influence on Soviet Lithuanian society.

KEYWORDS: Soviet television, Soviet Lithuania, Soviet popular culture, socialist entertainment, *Tadas Blinda*, Soviet West, Soviet media

INTRODUCTION

The rise of television was one of the main technological achievements of the Cold War. When the Soviet Union occupied Lithuania, as it did Latvia and Estonia, information was strictly limited, especially that which came from Western sources. Nevertheless, Lithuania, which was occupied, oppressed, and geographically limited in terms of access to radio broadcasts from abroad, stayed in then-prohibited contact with the outside world. In 1957, when a local television studio was founded in Vilnius, it was already clear that the content it produced would be limited and manipulated

into compliance with the Soviet Union's media system, with strict control from both the local party and the central USSR radio and television committee (Pečiulis, 2018:110). An identical structure of control was established in Lithuania, with the function of controlling and preparing content for local television broadcasts.

While the media in the USA, Great Britain, or other Western countries were successful in producing appealing TV content, Soviet television was criticised for its boring, monotonous, and propagandised broadcasts. Even the famous Lithuanian poet Kazys Saja, during one of the usual

party meetings, decried Soviet TV programs as boring, saying that “boredom in itself is counterrevolutionary’ (LYA, f 7688, n 2, s 30, l 53). It was a very accurate definition – just a few of the TV shows were considered interesting by the broader population, and an even smaller number of those were produced specifically for TV.

Soviet Lithuanian TV was counter-revolutionary in the worst way, as most of its airtime was saturated with propaganda; these were films about cities, factories, farming, or the malicious influence of religion (only a handful of these shows survived to this day). Information, education, and documentary programs comprised approximately 41 % of TV schedules, when nearly 58 % of its air time was given to culture, entertainment, fiction, and sports (Mihelj, Huxtable 2018:132). From these numbers, it is difficult to say how much entertainment or information consisted of propaganda material. Žygintas Pečiulis researched scripts of the 70s television and noted that television was a perfect fit for ideological propaganda because it was easy to access and understand (2013:126). Guests on talk shows were farmers and other socialist heroes endlessly talking about the significance of achievement and Soviet dominance, the development of communism, and most had a few quotes by Lenin or Marx for good measures. According to calculations, during the span of a single year, approximately 20 thousand speakers would usually appear on TV and radio (LYA, f 1771 n 244, s 3 l 100).

During the Leonid Brezhnev rule (1964–1982) culture was liberated and television turned from high culture programming to a more audience-oriented schedule (Roth-Ey 2011:275). Aniko Imre in her research on socialist TV stated that it's programming was mix-and-match of ideas imported and borrowed from Western European broadcasters, filtered through Soviet ideological directives and also emphasized some of the socialist bloc countries who defined themselves as culturally Western, including occupied Baltic states (Imre 2016: 8; 87). Sabina Mihelj and Simon Huxtable

also claims that socialist television was not entirely different from its relative in the West, or completely isolated from it (2018: 9).

This theoretical approach raises the question of how Soviet Lithuanian TV reacted to transnational tendencies of television production during Leonid Brezhnev rule and was there any traces of the general genres and topics which were seen not only on Western but also on other socialist TV programs. More importantly, what was the main influence of Soviet Lithuanian TV producers and was it used as an ideological tool?

Studies on Soviet television in Lithuania are a new field and analysis is looking into propaganda and censorship fields, ignoring transnational tendencies. Žygintas Pečiulis analysed Soviet Lithuanian TV, but his study mostly looked into early television live genres such as TV theatre with classic literature adaptations and compared it with theatre and cinema traditions (Pečiulis 2018). Arūnas Streikus in his study about censorship in Soviet Lithuania analyzed TV case, which had little or none ideological mistakes (Streikus 2018: 237). The most problematic study was written in 2017 when television celebrated its 60th jubilee. The book written by various authors tried to show its history, but made it into memoirs with incerppts from archival sources (Lietuvos televizija 2017). This book shows a naive point of view of Soviet television without analysing how some of the most memorable cases of TV production were made. Message of the book is that soviet Lithuanian television was a semi-independent structure, which tried to maneuver between national culture, communist ideology and censorship (2017: 113; 183).

Based on archival sources, periodicals, and historiography, this is the first attempt to analyse Soviet Lithuanian television from a transnational perspective. This paper examines selected cases and attempts to fill the gap between local historiography and foreign studies.

At this point, I assume that Soviet Lithuanian television also borrowed ideas from Western European broadcasters.

I chose two examples of popular TV production from 60s and 70s series *Petraičių šeimoje* (“The Petraitis Family”) (1965–1972) and four-part TV movie *Tadas Blinda* (1972).

This paper is organised into three sections. The first section seeks to describe the emergence of television and the role of Western culture and transnational tendencies in Soviet part of Iron Curtain. The second section examines the case of TV series *Petraičių šeimoje*, its origin, and popularity. The last section is dedicated to the iconic Lithuanian made-for-TV film, *Tadas Blinda*, whose popularity is still strong today, as defined by many Lithuanians as the best Lithuanian movie ever made.

THE WEST IN SOVIET WORLD: THE ENEMIES OR THE MOVING SPIRIT

On 23 August 1987 a group of well-known Lithuanian dissidents in Vilnius organised a public commemoration of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, which was yet to be acknowledged by the Soviet regime. The pact was proof that the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany divided Europe into their own spheres of influence; for the Baltic States, this pact proved illegal occupation by the Soviet Union in 1940 (Laurinavičius, Sirutavičius 2008:50). The participants also filmed television cameras had also been on-site. A week after the material was made into a highly propagandistic movie, *Akmuo už nugarą* (“A Stone Behind the Back”), where the speaker commented on the protesters and described them as “a crowd confused by Western radio stations”. Surprisingly, at the same time as the protest occurred, television began broadcasting music videos by popular Western music artists (Queen, A-ha, Peter Gabriel, Modern Talking) (*Komjaunimo tiesa* 1987) to prevent youth from participating in commemoration. Here, we see how Western culture functioned as a double agent in Soviet society: first as an enemy and second as a tool for diverting attention from anti-Soviet demonstrations.

This strategy was not a novel method for controlling the population of the Soviet

Union. Even though the Cold War was about isolating the society from “hostile” Western culture, Soviet officials themselves closely followed what was being broadcasted in the West. Stephen Lovell even insists that the Soviet radio did their own versions of popular Western broadcasts (2016: 158). For example, socialist Poland also sought to use Western television production to prevent the population from attending religious services (Mihelj, Huxtable 2018:188). Regardless of their political, intellectual, and cultural horizons, communist bigwigs in Poland favoured mainstream films and escapism over auteur cinema or simplistic propaganda pictures (Kunicki 2016:159).

Directions of how Western culture worked in the Soviet Union or occupied states are visible in some Soviet cinema studies. Elena and Alexander Prokhorovs, in their study of Soviet cinema, noted that after Stalins' death, the USSR started to make popular movies which were adapted from the popular West genres (Prokhorova, Prokhorov 2017:23), and Imports of Western TV production in the Soviet Union were only around 10 % in 1970, when socialist Poland had more than 50 % share (Mihelj, Huxtable 2018:189). By 1972, a rising number of Poles could travel to the West. Coca-Cola and other Western products have become more available. Movie theatres featured many more Western films, and radio stations began broadcasting significantly more Western music (Risch 2015,72; Pelka 2008,103, 104).

The Lithuanian case differed from that of Estonia, where Finnish TV programs were available in the northern part of the country and, from 1972, became a real “window into the West” (Lepp, Pantti 2012:76–77). Some of Lithuania's southern regions had access to socialist Polish TV broadcasts, where movies from the West were shown. Local communist officials even complained to Moscow about immoral TV programs being shown on Polish TV (LYA, f 1771, n 257, s 193, l 114). In view of this, it is no surprise that for many Lithuanians their “window to the West” was socialist Poland, which aired a wider variety of television shows and

films. The regime also saw these tendencies to tune Polish TV instead of local ones, and even tried to compete by extending Lithuanian programs on weekends (Streikus 2018:243).

Audience desire is also a typical topic in television programming. As a major sociological survey published in 1980, the most popular programs were those with less ideological content. For example, the first most popular TV show *Keliai. Mašinos. Žmonės* ("Roads. Cars. People"), and the third shows on the Žmogus chart. *Visuomenė. Įstatymas* ("Citizen. Society. Order") covered criminal activities, legal processes in Lithuania, alcohol abuse issues, and the driving culture in Lithuania, while the other three positions at the top of the chart were occupied by concerts or teleplays. People demanded entertainment rather than education. At the bottom of this survey, we found all atheist and socialist propaganda (TLTVR 1980: Priedas Nr. 1). People desired joyful shows, sports broadcasts, concerts, feature movies, and reality dramas after hard days at work, but the regime was able to deliver only a small amount of that. As in the case of Central TV, Lithuania also had its own TV blockbusters which, despite being charged with propaganda, were very popular and quite similar to what Western media showed at the time. These were not only game or quiz shows inviting the audience to participate.

Access to Western cinema production was limited, but not altogether banned, as it meant huge flows of income for Soviet authorities. One of the principal examples is John Sturges's 1960 Western *The Magnificent Seven*, which was released for Soviet cinemas in 1962 and had been notoriously cited in the Dnipropetrovsk KGB files as having a poor influence on local youngsters. There was also Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* in 1967 and Rudy Mate's *The 300 Spartans* in 1970, which successfully debuted Soviet cinema screens and had a huge impact on historical fiction and adventure genres. (Zhuk 2010:162-163) These cases showed Soviet institutions that they need to look for more entertaining themes than the heroic

epics about the October Revolution or the Second World War. During an inspection of Soviet cinemas in 1963, the authorities declared that domestically made movies attract only a few percent of all cinema-goers, while imported and usually outdated movies comprised 50 or more of all ticket sales (Gilburd 2018:206).

During the post-war period, the Soviet Union found it difficult to produce domestic movies. Soft and mainstream movies from the West became an important foundation for making money, with people not hesitating to watch these films, even during Stalin's reign. For example, movies about Tarzan had a huge impact in the early 1950s, with famous essayist Joseph Brodsky even saying that Tarzan contributed more to destalinization than all of Khrushchev's speeches (Shaw, Youngblood 2010:50).

James Schwoch has compared the Western and Eastern models of television and cited diplomats, noting that television in the USA was entertainment interrupted by commercials, while Soviet TV was propaganda interrupted by entertainment (Schwoch 2008: 112). This comparison might be correct if we talk about the period from the late 50s to the early 60s. Nikita Khrushchev's reign was all about battling the West and spreading scientific and antireligious propaganda, with the General Secretary even promising to "show the last priest on TV" (Smolkin 2018: 60).

However, the Soviet television model was not entirely about brainwashing and putting enormous amounts of "serious" material into broadcasting. "Most socialist regimes recognized early on that, in order to capitalize on the propaganda potential of television, they had to do more than prohibit and censor foreign program flows" (Imre 2016:133). Aniko Imre had other socialist states (Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, etc.) in mind, but this applied to the Soviet Union, especially to Western Soviet republics. This was first visible in cinema and domestically made movie productions, which replicated Hollywood's and other successful examples.

Made-for-TV movies were not something people saw at the dawn of television broadcasts. In 1957, the first Lithuanian TV broadcasts consisted mostly of old movies, news, and teleplays, which can likely be traced to attempts by local television to adhere to the guidelines set by the patronal Moscow TV. And in spite of the dull content available, TV sets were being sold exponentially with numbers rising from 32 to 1500 in the first year and to 21000 in 1960 (Štikelis 1983: 108–109). Television has rapidly entered the realm of everyday life and leisure, with broadcasters putting more time into the preparation of broadcasting schedules and choosing more entertaining programs over ideological ones. Soviet Lithuanian TV was also overshadowed by the patronal Moscow first channel and had no access to buying TV production from the Western states. During the initial five years, Lithuanian television broadcasted mostly live shows. TV plays were also broadcast straight from the studio, with audiences writing letters complaining of the poor quality of sound and image (LCVA, f R-981, n 2, s 23, l 46–50).

Live teleplays or live broadcasts from theatres were essential programs in early television schedules – some admired these teleplays as a unique genre of early television (Pečiulis 2018:287). However, public expectations regarding TV programs grew rapidly. In a 1959 meeting, Committee Chairman Jonas Janutis drew attention to viewers' letters asking for movies that had just been debuted in cinemas (LCVA, f R-754, n 4, s, 4985, l 37–38). The Lithuanian audience's expectations were much higher than those of television before the late 1960s. Even central television lagged behind – until the 1970s, which saw the heyday of Soviet TV movies and series – some produced by the state television's own film unit, Ekran (founded only in 1968), some commissioned from studios, and many featuring mainstream cinema stars (Roth-Ey 2011:231).

The regime realised the power of television only in the mid-1960s. Its slogan was defined by none other than Leonid

Brezhnev, who once said that “the Soviet person has the right to relax in front of a television set after a hard day's work” (*ibid*: 201). This was surprising; until Brezhnev's rule, the Soviet Union tried to force its society into collective leisure, as the state itself had been collective in all aspects. However, the slogan had another layer – the new medium was about to change into a more entertaining version. These trends were visible in the cinema field and were stylistically borrowed from the West. Alexander and Elena Prokhorovs notices this in popular movies by Eldar Riazanov (Prokhorova, Prokhorov 2017:118), A few of the programs made in Lithuania had gained their own cult status and resembled transnational tendencies in the made-for-TV production. In the following chapters, I will discuss a few cases of Brezhnev era TV productions.

HUMOR, SITCOMS, AND THE FIRST POPULAR TV SERIES

Controversial Soviet Lithuanian essayist Juozas Baltušis complained in his diary that the Tokyo Expo-70 exhibition had been shown everywhere in the world except for the Soviet Union. Instead, Soviet television showed a documentary on sheep shearing in Mongolia (Baltušis 2019:60). Baltušis wrote this on 15 March 1970. At that time, television in Lithuania was counting its 13th year of existence but still had difficulties with both its programming and scheduling. A few years later, Baltušis remarks about the TV series *Petraičių šeimoje*, praising the series and mentioning a conflict around its production, which caused a ripple within the structure of the TVR (*ibid*: 591). It was also one of the last times the series was broadcast. The series itself was one of the most successful and acclaimed cases of TV production on Soviet Lithuanian television.

The prevailing form of fictional TV shows at the time was broadcasts of classical literature adapted for theatre plays. Although the low budget and limited technical capabilities of the studios were evident on screen, this was also when Soviet Lithuanian TV had not yet found a formula

for producing entertainment content for television. Therefore, popular TV series or situational comedies (sitcoms) on communist television may sound like an oxymoron. Aniko Imre call these TV series “socialist soaps” and claims that “they all modeled ideal socialist lifestyles” (2016:200). Strictly limited and censored television directors and announcers faced huge control over the content, where every sentence had to be checked by the Glavlit and editorial offices. In the 1960s, when television programs mostly lived, a practice existed of conducting an official rehearsal before going on-screen, and employees of the LSSR TVR Committee noted that there was a persistent fear and perceived tremendous responsibility over content (Pečiulis 2018:133).

By the time television had just appeared in the Soviet Union in the 1950s, Northern American and other Western TV studios stood behind the so-called “golden age of television,” which in itself was based on the success of sitcoms. The first episode of the iconic sitcom *I Love Lucy* was aired on CBS in 1951. With its basic apartment setting, it showed the basic principles of the situational comedy genre, which deals with the daily problems of people in a humorous form. It was an era of prerecorded audience laughs, booming living conditions, and television as an integral part of daily life in the USA. It showed not only the life of an ordinary American family but, more importantly, an American way of life.

When *I Love Lucy* aired for the last time in 1957, TV broadcasting had just started in occupied Lithuania. The first television programs were not original, or were even made for television. Only in 1965, for a show called *Kultūra ir buitė* (“Culture and Domestic Life”), television employees created short live sketches about celebrating New Year’s Eve with advice on how to prepare for the celebrations. It was broadcasted live on December 24, on Christmas Eve (Lietuvos televizija 2017: 107–110). The date was not a coincidence, as the Soviet Union tried to replace the traditional Christmas festivities with New Year’s cele-

brations. The short sketches were very successful among the audience, so after a few years these were developed into a separate TV series called *Petraičių šeimoje* that were broadcasted once per month. During the course of 1965–1972, these became one of the most successful productions of Soviet Lithuanian TV. Broadcast live, these series embodied the very same notions on which the American golden age TV series had been based.

The situations depicted in *Petraičių šeimoje* were filmed in an apartment setting, and the main characters were a middle-class family and their neighbours facing common problems associated with daily life. Different episodes depicted various issues which many Soviet citizens were familiar with. Christine E. Evans notes that *Petraičių šeimoje* was one of the best way to reveal ideological truth, because it “approaches the artistic and journalistic understanding of reality from the opposite side: via the encounter of the actor and everyday life” (Evans 2016: 157–158). Most episodes of *Petraičių šeimoje* convey moral messages through their sketches. The characters could criticise the bourgeois lifestyle or product shortages, but the red line was clear on one hand – political topics were out of the question. For example, central Soviet television followed four simple rules that all TV game show participants were asked to respect: never joke about any members of the Central Committee or the Politburo, never joke about countries with which the Soviet Union has tenuous diplomatic relations, and finally, never joke about the KGB (Janco 2013:133). These basic rules were also relevant to this series. As the characters made jokes about food shortages, alcohol abuse, or the endless lines for receiving an apartment, they never questioned either the legitimacy of the ruling regime or the party, and never joked about its secretaries.

However, social satire had a strong effect on the audience, and the director of the series, Galina Dauguvietytė, later noted the particular risk of some of these jokes. And even though the communist

party could ban the show any minute, there was one particularly big fan of *Petraičių šeimoje* at the Central Committee – First Secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party Antanas Sniečkus – who enjoyed the series and made sure it was not taken off the air despite that it had already fallen in bad graces with the official institutions (Dauguvietytė 2002: 226; 232). It must be said that these testimonies are exaggerated, as the show was not at all anti-Soviet, but only dealt with the habits of the population which were obvious at the time. This was a demonstration of all socialist values in the amusing form of a sitcom. This was especially true in terms of the time when the “pilot” episode was aired, signifying the Soviet Union’s policy of substituting Christian festivities with the Soviet New Year’s celebrations. In the 1971 TVR committee meetings there were suggestions to insert more anti-religious messages in the *Petraičių šeimoje* sitcom (LYA, f 7688, n 2, s 16, l 210–225).

Some archival sources testify to conflicts surrounding the socialist TV sitcom, which mostly came from public complaints. On one occasion in 1970, Chairman Januitis was forced to apologise to the Council of Ministers because of a particular sketch that had directly criticised preschool system workers (or kindergarten staff, not noted), portraying these institutions as problematic and their principals as incompetent (LCVA, f R-754, n 4, s 7835, l 13–14). There were also many stories about factories or collective farming-themed episodes that the kolkhoz or factory chairmen were not happy about. One such episode was a story about manure shortage. Another was about fake marriages, practiced as a way for graduate students to get out of possible job assignments to small towns or villages as part of their compulsory work in the provinces (LCVA, f R-981, n 16, s 1185, l 1–19). One of the most critical episodes criticised the quality of life in newly built suburbs, where electricity is gone, there are no shops around, ceilings are too thick, and bedbugs are already there. Characters also mention that the waiting line for a flat

was 15 years which was a common reality in those days (LCVA, f R-981, n 16, c 492, l 78–96).

Even though the critique now appears aimed at the regime, at its time it was directed toward the negative habits prevalent among socialist people. These included acquiring goods via illegal practices and networks of informal connections, the so-called *blat*. This form of social criticism is common in Brezhnev’s rule. The sketches themselves were critical of society’s shortcomings, but not directly critical of the regime, unlike some of the series produced after the Soviet Union’s collapse. Simon Huxtable analyses the function of satire in the Soviet Union and notes that by reading satirical feuilletons and exposés of public misdeeds, readers would be inspired to identify and eliminate such behaviours from public life as a prerequisite for building communism (Huxtable 2022: 85). This was the real purpose of the situational comedy in Lithuanian SSR TV and could answer the question of how such a critical and problematic series remained in air for such a long time. This was a pure example of Soviet humour and education at the same time, carried across to the audience through a peculiar Soviet adaptation of situational comedy.

On 10 July 1972 the Television and Radio Party Organization meeting, the committee’s chairman praised the series for its strong and influential anti-alcohol propaganda (LYA, f 7688, n 2, s 19, l 47–50). However, ironically, the following year, at the same party organisation meeting in June 1973, Vladas Leipus concluded that the series was cancelled due to severe depictions of alcohol abuse (LYA, f 7688, n 2, s 27, l 124). The scandal presents an interesting case, considering that socialist TV programs were “pure” in the sense that they were only allowed to depict people as role models or as examples of a decent socialist society; thus, the show was cancelled for good when it became too edgy. For most of society, however, this was a surprise, as the show had attracted a huge audience and its popularity was still high.

The setting of the series is similar to that of the American golden age sitcoms. The question rests on whether *Petraičių šeimoje* was a direct copycat from Western TV and how the concept for the series reached Soviet Lithuanian TV screens. The shows' director Galina Dauguvietytė said that idea for family-centered situational comedy came to her mind when she heard the Polish radio program, which concerned the issues of daily life in communist Poland¹ (LRT 2019). The socialist block has more examples of family sitcoms set in apartment buildings, such as *Rodina Blahova* (1959–1960, Czechoslovakia) and *Heute bei Krügers* (1960–1963, the GDR). Hungary and Poland had their sitcoms, too, but among the most cited are radio shows about socialist family life called *A Szabo Csalad* (1959–2007). Looking at the cultural ties in the late 1950s and 60s, sitcoms produced in the USA could have had an indirect influence on the first Lithuanian sitcom through exposure to content from Czechoslovakia, Poland, the GDR, or Hungary. These countries had limited access to Western media and adapted these examples into the socialist entertainment genre.

Strangely, there were no family themed sitcoms on All-Union TV. Evans notes that ambivalence toward the genre was stronger inside Central Television (Evans 2016:155). These kinds of sitcoms were made only in Lithuania and Estonia, which, in particular, began airing *Mis Koosta peres uudist?* ("What's new in the Koosta family?") in the same year. The situation in occupied Estonia and Lithuania was different from regions closer to the central authority, as sometimes the central government would allow the union's Western republics to air some of the forbidden content, as the audiences in these republics were strongly influenced by radio broadcasts from the West. TV series played their role in consolidation as well, namely consolidation through pure socialist joy. There was no

real conflict between the republic and the central authority, as Chairman Januitis and series director G. Dauguvietytė would have us believe. It is a bluff to say that *Petraičių šeimoje* was produced against Moscow's will; in 1971, the series even received the All-Union Journalist Prize.

If *I Love Lucy* was a typical example of family based TV shows in the USA, showing that the standards of American living as well as the American way of life, socialist TV series were more concerned with showing the socialist way of life through both entertainment and education. Thus, the production process of socialist TV sitcoms was a process of hybridisation in the sense of adapting the "right" content to a "successful" form. During the LSSR TVR Committee meetings and its annual reports, *Petraičių šeimoje* was usually mentioned as a successful example of mixing entertainment with education, a show that manages to carry across the basic principles of socialism and demonstrate society's shortcomings in an amusing way. However, if one were to look deeper into this show, one would see that the criticism is voiced not against the system but against the philistine habits of the people, including criticism of the bourgeois lifestyle, in the same way that it was decried in the speeches of the USSR's general secretaries. As Kristian Feigelson notes, Soviet mass culture operated under a double burden: it had to both edify and entertain (Feigelson 2018:72). The first original TV series on Soviet Lithuanian TV, which I would classify as a sitcom, did precisely that.

FROM LOCAL MYTH TO BLOCK-BUSTER SOCIALIST ADVENTURE

The practice of blending the Western form with socialist content is also apparent in one of the most popular adventure films ever produced by Soviet Lithuanian TV. *Tadas Blinda* (1972) is another example of how copycats from popular Western movies were made into successful TV adaptations for Soviet audiences. The story, based on a Lithuanian legend of a bandit-turned-folk-hero, was made into a four-part movie

¹ Still unclear which one of the programs are mentioned as the main inspiration. There is a version that it was comedy drama about Kuzniecow family, but more likely it was popular radio drama *Matysiakowie* (1956-).

that earned its own legendary status. The film's idea and script were borrowed from popular Hollywood movies of the time and resembled stories like Robin Hood or Pushkin's Andrei Dubrovsky intertwined with strong national sentiments and Marxist ideas about the revolt of the oppressed in the 19th century. Adventure genre was not unique in the context of Soviet Union as discussions about it appeared in 1969 (Prokhorova, Prokhorov 2017: 6–7). The strategy of reworking folk songs and stories about larger-than-life outlaws into socialist TV series was a common way in the socialist hemisphere in the 60s or 70s (Imre 2013:36).

In the late 1960s and the early 1970s, the historical past was a little more free from censorship but with some reservations. Justinas Marcinkevičius's *Mindaugas* (1968) was a successful beginning of his historical drama trilogy. As Nerija Putinaitė notes, the trilogy spoke of a different model of patriotism, which meant that collaboration with the Soviet regime could be treated as a Lithuanian patriotic action (2019:302). The rest of J. Marcinkevičius's famous trilogy (*Katedra* (1971), *Mažvydas* (1977)) delves into historical sentiments and is still read to this day, even though it invokes a different category of national sentiment, one diluted with socialist realities and principles of class struggle.

Some films in Lithuanian Soviet cinema looked to the past, yet all were quite unfortunate and bleak attempts to portray Lithuania's history as very dark and oppressing. Folklore stories consisted of an endless battle against the nobility, and Lithuanians were constructed as poor peasants. Putinaitė explains as this was the case for making national consciousness into inferiority and lack of self-esteem (Putinaitė 2007:73). During this period, Lithuanian TV produced an ethnographical movie titled *Senovinės Kupiškėnų vestuvės* ("Old Wedding Rites of Kupiškis People," 1971), which depicted historical wedding traditions in a Lithuanian village. Although the film was praised at the Committee's art council meeting, there was some criticism

of the movie for showing too many crosses and other religious heritage objects (LCVA, f R-981, n 2, s 81, l 80). The late 1960s were a big turn for the Central Soviet Television and Lithuanian SSR TV as well. At this time, television had just acquired the capacity to make larger productions when the "Telefilmas" unit was established as a part of TVR. This unit was responsible for producing bigger movies, mostly documentary ones, but it was also responsible for making television more independent from the local cinema studio.

Hence, in the 1970s, television was already a little more liberated from Soviet control and censorship. This was partly due to the reputation of Jonas Januitis, who had held his office since 1953 and was regarded by the party's functionaries as an influential man both in Vilnius and Moscow. When Sergei Lapin, the new All-Union TV and Radio Committee Chairman, came to power, Januitis suggested the idea of producing an adventure movie about the legendary Lithuanian robber Tadas Blinda (Januitis 1998: 330–332). The story dates back to 19th century folk culture and is a legend of a notorious bandit and his gang living in the woods, which positions Tadas Blinda as an individual facing social injustice, especially after his father's death and the master's refusal to allow Blinda to bury his father, instead compelling the young man to carry on with his farm duties. The film shows this as a turning point for Blinda's character in becoming a fighter for social justice (Tadas Blinda 1972). In reality, the existence of one Tadas Blinda is questionable. For most of the population, it was still an allegorical framework for national resistance against the Soviets, as the landlords who oppressed Lithuanian peasants were wealthy Russians and Poles. However, in terms of the film's message, the story is constructed on the basic principle of class struggle, with peasants rioting against the bourgeois. The legend, on the other hand, was collected by Lazdynų Pelėda and Gabrielius Landsbergis-Žemkalnis (Landsbergis-Žemkalnis 1908), notable intellectuals of the 19th century national awakening

movement, and was well known in the First Lithuanian Republic. Under Soviet rule, it was modified by Kostas Korsakas, adapting the figure of an enigmatic national hero to serve the Marxist concept of the struggle against the bourgeois (LTA 1963:225). By then it had begun to transform in its own right – into a popular socialist hero with Western cultural undertones.

The demand for big adventure motion pictures in Lithuania, where production budgets were limited, was a strange and difficult venture for the television industry. It required extra money and more actors, and might have been impossible under the conditions of the Soviet Union. However, the USSR's cultural policy made a difference in that it promoted productions such as these, as in the case of *Petraičių šeimoje*, favouring the ideal blend of an entertaining form with nationalist undertones and a story built on communist or Marxist logic. Television in Lithuania needed its own epic picture, following the successful examples of other socialist countries that widely influenced the whole bloc (Januitis 1998:333). However, this led to the difficulty of such undertaking. If *Petraičių šeimoje* was based on relevant problems and could naturally deal with socialist life, the script for *Tadas Blinda* was a journey back in time, forced to reconcile the nationalist sentiments of the 19th century with USSR policy. However, Blinda's story was appropriate for ideological reasons because it had political and social gathering potential (Balkelis 2009:90).

Blinda's journey to the silver screen was an adventure beginning in Great Britain and the USA. In the mid-1950s, Disney studios produced the TV series *Zorro*, while the British production company Sapphire Films made *The Adventures of Robin Hood* – both were bought by Hungarian and Polish TV. Needless to say, both series were very popular among the younger audience and cultivated fascination with Western popular culture. After the series finished airing in Hungary, the local screenwriter Ferenc Orsi came up with the idea of creating a similar TV series but based on a national

Hungarian narrative, like a legend about the national hero of Hungary during the Rakosci Uprising in the 18th century (Imre 2016:144). The story debuted in 1964 as a 13-part TV series titled *Tenkesz Kapitania* ("The Captain of Tenkesz"), which explored the nationalist sentiment associated with the Hungarian uprising against the Austrian Habsburg monarchy. The Hungarian authorities used this narrative for its symbolic value, which, in Marxist terms, was a perfect fit for its national identity.

Aired in the late 1960s, these purely socialist retellings of Zorro or Robin Hood were very popular in Lithuania too and were the main impulse behind the TV Chairman and his team's efforts to create a Lithuanian version of *Tenkesz*. As Januitis admits, first came idea for the adventure TV movie and only then they were looking for a national hero to fit in that script (Januitis 1998: 330–333). As mentioned earlier, imported fictional films from Western or socialist bloc countries were previously shown in Lithuanian cinemas. These films were somewhat of an issue in Lithuania, as Chairman of the Cinematography Committee Vytautas Baniulis complained in a 1968 report that cinemas are making money by showing Western "boeviki" (i.e., action) movies, while domestic productions are not in big demand (LLMA, f 473, n 1, s, 143, l 82–84). Comparisons between Western movies and the famous Vytautas Žalakevičius 1965 film *Niekas nenorėjo mirti* ("Nobody Wanted to Die"), instead calling it an Eastern movie, were no coincidence either. Television studios were far worse, as they were less technologically capable, had limited creative resources, and were unable to decide independently on buying rights for foreign production. Western production would sometimes be broadcast, but only on All-Union TV. Another huge inspiration was the British TV adaptation of John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga*, bought by Soviets in 1968 and shown on the Central Channel in the summer of 1971 (*Kalba Vilnius* 1971). This was also a huge sensation, and the first time a historical drama series from the West was broadcast in the Soviet Union.

Coincidentally or not, in May 1971, Januitis accepted a film script originally called the *King of the Bivainė Forest*. As the Art and Television Council noted, it was an ethnographical-historical movie with strong socialist connotations (LCVA, f R-981, n 2, s 82, l 181–184). The script was written by Rimantas Šavelis and eventually became a four-part TV film now known as *Tadas Blinda*. The film is a problematic case-bearing aspect of Westernisation, Sovietization, and, most importantly, the cultural search for a superhero. During another meeting of the Art Committee, it was noted that the creators of *Tadas Blinda* should look to *The Forsyte Saga* for a good example of a historical film, adding that “we are seeking not historical accuracy but truth in art” (*ibidem*). However, labelling *Tadas Blinda* as a historical film is quite inaccurate, as Šavelis simply based its protagonist on a folk tale. A pivotal role was also played by the movie’s director Balys Bratkauskas, who had earned his reputation as a manufacturer of historical myths, most notably for his work on the image of revolutionary poet Julius Janonis, who died in 1917 and was posthumously glorified as a pure example of the socialist hero (Kaminskaitė-Jančorienė, Mikonis-Railienė 2015: 114–115). This was followed by the 1959 film *Julius Janonis*, which was well met by the audience at premiere and in the subsequent years established the figure of Janonis as one of the core symbols of pre-revolutionary times. Similar to Janonis, Blinda was a made-up hero whose biography and existence were in question. A Lithuanian warrior of social justice, a man who had fought the bourgeois without any awareness that he could later be reborn as a socialist figure. The audience was lead to believe that Blinda’s struggle was not for Lithuanian independence but for the well-being of the peasants, in need of liberation from evil bourgeois forces. Even the film reviews praised Blinda as a local Robin Hood or Zorro figure, while also incidentally comparing the film to *The Forsyte Saga* (Macaitis 1973). Some of the most peculiar corrections that the creators made to the film had to do with the

wedding scene; originally, it was supposed to depict a traditional church setting and Kristina’s character as arriving from Paris. In the corrected version, the wedding ceremony is held in the woods, with Kristina returning not from Paris, but St. Petersburg (Pūras 2016). The relocation of the wedding was a common, practical move; folk culture was tolerated because it weakened the interwar Lithuanian tradition and did not seem to be inspired by Western culture.

The case of *Tadas Blinda* exemplifies what Aniko Imre calls the instrument of “nationalistic edutainment” – nationalism becoming the cornerstone of socialist governments and their media policies across the region, and the glorification of heroes fighting for social justice against the bourgeois, thus indirectly leading to social revolutions (Imre 2016:133). And yet the Blinda we see on screen, as a mythologized hero of old, feels more familiar to the socialist bloc than it could ever be to Moscow, whose national myth was built around the Second World War, providing heroic narratives for Central TV productions in the 1970s, the most notable example of which is *Seventeen Moments of Spring*, depicting a perfectly Soviet story about the double spy Otto Von Stirlitz. However, critics met *Tadas Blinda* very well. The Soviet-era annotation for the movie reads that “Šavelis’s story allowed the film to concentrate less on historical realia [...] and more on the social characteristics of the characters and the romantic adventures of *Tadas Blinda* in his struggle against the exploiters” (Valiulis 1981: 77–78). Therefore, even though Blinda was dressed in a folk costume, he became a typical symbol of Marxism devoid of any national or patriotic sentiments, which the authorities tried to outweigh by imitating Western adventure movies.

As stated in the conclusion of a 1973 TV letters summary, “[t]he first Lithuanian fiction series *Tadas Blinda* has highly popularised Lithuanian television. The film is well received and the public expects a sequel” (LCVA, f 981, n 2, s 103, l 78). However, despite its huge success rate, there were no sequelae. Altogether, Lithuanian

TV has ceased making big productions like these for more than five years, but not owing to any scandal. Even Antanas Sniečkus was at the premiere and complimented the film. The First Secretary could have enjoyed *Tadas Blinda* because it corresponded to his political model and illustrated what was called “national communism.” However, the film owed its success to another reason: it was hugely inspired by rival Western productions.

CONCLUSION

The examples of Soviet Lithuanian TV production analysed in this paper belong to different film genres, but both show a specific strategy used in the Soviet Union during Brezhnev’s rule: to utilise television as a source of entertainment infused with socialist ideas and principles. The TV series *Petraičių šeimoje* and the four-part TV film *Tadas Blinda* represent the usual practice of producing shows similar in form to Western popular culture, yet socialist in content. This influence can mostly be traced back to semi-autonomous socialist countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, where fictional TV shows from the West were limited, but not completely banned. In the early 1960s, it became obvious that the original socialist bloc’s production was highly impacted by its Western rivals. Memoirs, historiography, and historical memories all point to British, American, and French television as having influenced

or furthered the development of TV content in the Soviet Union, especially in the case of Soviet-occupied Lithuania. These foreign shows were rare and became sensations in the dull scheduling net of Soviet television, exposing the flawed approach of Soviet film studios and creating a niche for propaganda-infused copycats. Soviet television can be best defined as a kingdom of mirrors, as it not only sought to create a new Soviet identity, but also attempted to deliver amusement with education.

Soviet Lithuanian television was also influenced by transnational trends. Copying the West was an ordinary practice for making socialist TV more pleasant. This not only applies to fictional shows. Western influence was also obvious in game shows and concert broadcasts, bringing a little more enjoyment to bleak socialist life. It even played a part in raising the local TV culture to standards more reminiscent of Hollywood, allowing Soviet actors to quickly reach stardom, even if long-time Chairman Januitis or any other state functionaries were opposed to that. Both examples presented in this paper demonstrate a pure hybridisation of Western formats through other socialist states, especially Poland. Both have their roots in Western media and both reached Lithuania through Eastern European socialist countries. Using a popular form, Lithuanian SSR TV was able to simultaneously entertain and educate people (or brainwash) at the same time.

REFERENCES

Archival sources:

Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas (LCVA)

LCVA f R-754 Lietuvos TSR Ministrų Taryba

LCVA f R-981 Lietuvos TSR valstybinis televizijos ir radijo komitetas (LCVA)

Lietuvos literatūros ir meno archyva (LLMA)

LLMA f 473 Lietuvos TSR valstybinis kinematografijos komitetas

Lietuvos ypatingasis archyvas (LYA)

LYA, f 1771 Lietuvos komunistų partijos (LKP) centro komitetas

LYA, f 7688 Lietuvos TSR valstybinio televizijos ir radijo komiteto Lietuvos komunistų partijos (LKP) Vilniaus miesto Spalio rajono pirminė organizacija

Balkelis, Tomas 2009. 'Tado Blindos mitas'. – Rita Repšienė (eds.) *Istorinės realybės ir mitai nacionalinėse kultūrose: Dabarties vizija*. Vilnius: Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno institutas, 2009, p. 77–93.

Baltušis, Juozas 2019. *Vietoj dienosraščio, 1970–1975*, Vilnius: Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla.

Evans, Christine 2016. *Between Truth and Time: A History of Soviet Central Television*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

Feigelson, Kristian 2018. 'Soviet Television and Popular Mass Culture in the 1960s'. – *Euxeinos*, Vol. 8, No. 25–26, p. 72–81.

Gilburd, Eleonory 2018. *To see Paris and die : the Soviet lives of Western culture*. Cambridge [Mass.] ; London : The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Huxtable, Simon 2022. *News from Moscow: Soviet Journalism and the Limits of Postwar Reform*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Imre, Aniko 2016. *TV Socialism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Iordanova, Dina 2003. *Cinema of the other Europe : the industry and artistry of East Central European film*. London : New York [N.Y.] : Wallflower Press.

Janco, Andrew; Turncock, Rob and Goddard, Peter (eds.) 2013. 'KVN: Authenticity and Improvised Comedy in the Soviet Union, 1957–1971', in *Popular Television in Authoritarian Europe*. Manchester: University of Manchester Press.

Januitis, Jonas 1998. *Užvakar ir šiandien : 35 metai eterio tarnyboje*. Vilnius : Rosma.

Kaminskaitė-Jančorienė, Lina; Mikonis-Railienės, Anna 2015. *Kinas sovietų Lietuvoje. Sistema, filmai, režisieriai*. Vilnius : Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla.

Kunicki, Mikołaj 2017. 'Poland's Wild West and East: Polish Westerns of the 1960s'. – Dorota Ostrowska, Francesco Pitassio and Zsuzsanna Varga (eds.), *Popular Cinemas in East Central Europe. Film Cultures and Histories*. London – New York: I. B. Tauris, p. 157–172.

Landsbergis-Žemkalnis, Gabrielius 1908. *Blinda, svieto lygintojas*, [S.l.].

Laurinavičius, Česlovas; Sirutavičius, Vladas 2008. *Lietuvos istorija. T. 12, d. 1, Sąjūdis: nuo "persitvarkymo" iki Kovo 11-osios*. Vilnius : Baltos lankos.

Lepp, Anika; Pantti, Mervi 2013. 'Window to the West: Memories of Watching Finnish Television in Estonia During the Soviet Period'. – *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture*, Jg. 2, 3, S. 77–87. <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/14072> (14 January 2023).

LTA = *Lietuvių tautosakos apybraiža* 1963.

[K. Korsakas (eds.) ... [et al.], Vilnius: Valstybinė politinės ir mokslinės literatūros leidykla.

Lietuvos televizija, 1957–2017: Faktai, kūrėjai, laidos 2017, ed. Ona Pečiulienė, Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidybos centras.

Lovell, Stephen 2015. *Russia in the Microphone Age: A History of Soviet Radio, 1919–1970*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mihelj, Sabina, and Simon Huxtable 2018. *From Media Systems to Media Cultures: Understanding Socialist Television*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pečiulis, Žygintas 2018. *Bokštą gaubianti paslaptis : TV medijos radimasis Lietuvoje : monografija*. Vilnius : Vilniaus universiteto leidykla.

Pečiulis, Žygintas 2013. 'Sovietinės televizijos diskurso daugialypumas: oficialumo ir nuoširdumo drama' – *Information & Media*, 63, 113–128. <https://doi.org/10.15388/Im.2013.0.1588>

Pelka, Anna 2008. *Jugendmode und Politik in der DDR und in Polen*. Osnabrook: Fibre Verlag

Prokhorov Alexander, and Prokhorova Elena 2016. *Film and Television Genres of the Late Soviet Era*. Bloomsbury Publishing

Putinaite, Nerija 2007. Nenutrūkusi styga. Pristatymas ir pasipriešinimas sovietų Lietuvoje. Vilnius: Aidai.

Putinaite, Nerija 2019. *Skambantis molis : dainų šventės ir Justino Marcinkevičiaus trilogija kaip sovietinio lietuviškumo ramsčiai*. Vilnius : Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademija.

Pūras, Kazimieras 2016. 'K. Pūro prisiminimai apie svieto lygintoją – „Tadą Blindą“'. – LRT <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/tavo-lrt/15/131737/k-puro-prisiminimai-apie-svietio-lygintoja-tada-blinda> (13 January 2023).

Risch, William 2015. 'A Soviet West: Nationhood, regionalism, and empire in the annexed western borderlands'. – *Nationalities Papers*, 43(1), 63–81.

Roth-Ey, Kristin 2011. *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cultural Cold War*. Cornell University Press.

Schwoch, James 2008. *Global TV: New Media and the Cold War, 1946–69*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Shaw, Tony; Youngblood, Denise J. 2010. *Cinematic Cold War: the American and Soviet struggle for hearts and minds*. Lawrence : University Press of Kansas.

Smolkin, Victoria 2018. *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism*, Princeton, New Jersey; Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Streikus, Arūnas 2018. *Minties kolektyvizacija. Cenzūra sovietų Lietuvoje*. Vilnius: Naujasis židinys-Aidai.

Štikelis, Stasys 1983. *Radijas ir televizija : informacinis žinybas*. Vilnius : Lietuvos TSR Valstybinis televizijos ir radijo komitetas.

Tadas Blinda 1972. *Lietuvos filmų centras*. <http://www.lfc.lt/lt/Page=MovieList&ID=326&GenreID=454> (19 January 2023).

Valiulis, Skirmantas 1981. 'Mažoji ekrano filmai'. – Bonifacas Gintalas, Alfredas Šimkus (eds.) *Lietuvių kino menas šiandien*. Vilnius : Mintis, p. 75–85.

Zhuk, Sergei I. 2010. *Rock and roll in the Rocket City: The West, identity, and ideology in Soviet Dnepropetrovsk, 1960–1985*, Washington [D.C.]: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Baltimore [Md.]: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Periodical sources:

Kalba Vilnius 1971. 'Dvidešimt šeši vakarai su Forsaitais'. – June 25, Nr. 24.

Komjaunimo tiesa 1987. 'tv', 1987-08-21, Nr. 161 (10616), p. 4.

LRT 2019. 'Svečiuose pas „Petraičių šeimą“: tiesioginės serialo transliacijos ir aktorių improvizacijos'. <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/gyvenimas/13/1116220/sveciuose-pas-petraiciu-seima-tiesiogines-serialo-transliacijos-ir-aktoriu-improvizacijos> (15 January 2023).

Macaitis, Saulius 1973. 'Keturi vakarai su Tadu Blinda'. – *Tiesa*, 10 march.

TLTVR = Tarybų Lietuvos televizija ir radijas 1979 *metais*. Vilnius. 1980.

Tomas Vaitelė is a PhD candidate in history at the Vilnius University, faculty of history, working on his doctoral dissertation *Soviet Television in Lithuania (1957–1991): Between the Regimes' Goals, Public Expectations and Professional Ambitions*. His research interests include the control and censorship of media in the Soviet Union, popular culture during the Cold War, and film and music history.

