

# SERIALITY AND POPCULTURAL SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*The essay examines the topic of legitimacy of popular culture as a potentially productive space and an autonomous field of specific genres, narrative patterns, economic conditions, and stemming pleasures. In particular, what is addressed is the discrepancy between the cult of television serial genre on the one hand and its rejection in art criticism in contemporary Czech society. The authors demonstrate that unlike viewers and producers, the most eloquent elitist critics do not exhibit much respect for the genre of television serial.*

## KEY WORDS

*seriality – television serial – critique of culture – inclusive paradigm*

Seriality is both delightful and magically deceitful, while its pleasure lies in the gradual unravelling of a story. In the television environment, it works above all as an economic tool,<sup>2</sup> yet the fundamental principle of its popularity with audiences (and thus producers) is fiercely erotic, based on a manipulation of desire (naturally sublimated, to some extent). Willingly and often enthusiastically, the audience allows the distributors to dose the story step-by-step, without having the option of influencing this procedure. This means that they ceaselessly search for short-term satisfactions, reliably followed by frustrations. From a psychological point of view, the popularity of television serials is closely associated with petty everyday masochism; serial reception cannot exist without an outer strict story organiser who cuts it off at a precisely given moment. It is totally impossible for the viewer to control the consumption of the story, delimitate it on their own and enjoy it in doses determined beforehand. Therefore, seriality has not been successful in the environment of permanent and continuous Internet availability. Seriality may only succeed when there is an external “censor” and a stimulant of the audience’s desire, a narrative organiser and its distributor.

So far, seriality has characterized every modern communication medium appearing on the technological scene (with the above mentioned and explained exception of the Inter-

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2 This is expressed by Robert C. Allen claiming that “the economic structure of American television broadcasting rises and falls with habitual television watching”. For a long time, advertisers have been aware of the fact that a single exposure to an advertising message has only a negligible effect on consumption behaviour. It is its repetition that matters most. Appearing first on the radio and then on television, serials have contributed to establishing a regular audience whose attention is the most valuable article with which television companies have been trading until today. (Allen 1985: 47)

net). In respect of what both producers and audiences find interesting, mediated serial fictions are a purely modern phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> They became an integral part of the media repertoire in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was the cartoon<sup>4</sup> that became popular among stories published in instalments, while episodic narratives gradually caught on in film, radio and obviously television.<sup>5</sup>

## 1. Far from art

The popularity of the serial, in particular in its dominant television version, goes hand in hand with various social, psychological and economic transformations in modern society and also with the structure of the television industry.<sup>6</sup> It relates to subliminated desire and a permanent neurosis of the modern human being, as well as improved television marketing, the use of regular and easy to measure audiences in order to (necessarily) commodify cultural television communication. Seriality has always been closely associated with the ordinary human needs of the given eras. In case of modernity, we could understand the triumph of seriality throughout media technologies as a reaction to the everlasting dissatisfaction of the modern human being – the one who believes that everything will be sorted out as a progression towards the future, i.e. “to be continued”. In the case of the homological relation between seriality and post-modern mentality, it is nevertheless necessary to emphasise that according to Glen Creeber, these two forms have a lot in common. Fragmenting procedures and techniques of soap operas penetrate into other serial forms, which are then filled with a multiplicity of perspectives, multiplied by story lines and dream-like features. (Creeber 2004: 5) Seriality tends to correspond to whatever distresses its consumers in the given era, rather than to formalistic efforts to create flawless “beauty”. Besides,

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- 3 Apparently, seriality is not in contradiction with any type of a communication context, so theoretically there was no reason why it should not characterize pre-modern communication contents as well. (Some traditional contents also have serial features: for instance, reading the Gospels in Catholic ceremonies during the liturgical year.) In principle, however, the effective distribution of serial narration is associated with the conditions of modern society, such as the appearance of a sufficiently large and knowledgeable audience or a reduction in the price of reproduction techniques and their spread. For more on the abrupt development of mechanical reproduction, see for instance Benjamin 1970.
- 4 The Yellow Kid by Richard Felton Outcault is considered to be the first relevantly distributed cartoon. It was first published in the New York World and from 1895 in Hearst's New York Morning Journal. (Hagedorn in Allen 1995: 27-49)
- 5 In the first three decades of the 20th century, serial films were actually screened in American metropolises, usually at the weekends. This has also produced the term “cliffhanger” referring to an open end of an episode, currently used e.g. in soap operas. Weekend episodes of the first serial films were supposed to provoke strong reactions and curiosity so that viewers would come to see another episode the following weekend. Therefore, they usually ended with a dramatic situation when the main protagonist hung onto a cliff with their finger. (Ang 2005: 53)
- 6 This paper occasionally works with the term “serial” which deliberately accepts the domestic practice to label any story in instalments (episodic and dosed narration) just as a “serial”. Compared to, for instance, English-language television culture, the lack of distinction within the group of episodic narratives is extremely striking. The Czech “compact” conception of serial narratives may be perceived as one of the symptoms of the cult of seriality. (Reifová 2001: 164) It is noteworthy that despite adopting a large number of patterns from the reference cultures of the so-called West after 1989, the domestic terminology describing serial narratives has remained untouched, i.e. both lay and professional public still continues to use the term of “serial”. It is the English-language television culture that has demonstrated a much more refined sense of differentiating among serial narratives, not only in professional terminology, but also in the common sense language. For instance, apart from one-off television narratives (television play and television film), Creeber also distinguishes the soap opera, series, anthology series, serial and mini-series. (Creeber 2004: 8) Furthermore, serial narratives also include the sitcom (e.g. Langford in Bignell, Lacey 2005: 15-23) and docusoap. (Bignell 2003: 198)

the fact that it takes place in time is one of its most intensive dimensions, thus having the ability to “comment on” the flow of time.<sup>7</sup> Seriality is much more intensely associated with everydayness and related needs than aesthetic perfection. If there is something that has always been far fetched for seriality (and television serials in particular) it is art or artistic ambitions.

It is quite anachronistic that the critique of domestic culture has not valued sufficiently the division of genre definitions and competences between art and popular culture. Until now, it has not established an adequate and publicly acknowledged approach to the genre of television serial, nor to popculture as such. It can be claimed that the overwhelming majority of the Czech intellectual scene, in contrast with, for instance, the Anglo-Saxon environment, despise popular culture formats, refusing to consider them as a legitimate carrier of cultural meanings and (to put it briefly), resisting the process of adequate rehabilitation of popular culture. Assessing reality shows, soap operas, contests, music hits or computer games using approaches developed within aesthetics, art criticism or dramatic art represents a simple and straightforward – yet not very exciting – task. The result is clear beforehand – the criticism of domestic culture is characterized by a self-fulfilling prophecy. On the other hand, it lacks an independent and wider journalistic discourse about the qualities and deficiencies of popular culture contents, i.e. a space which would not be “contaminated” by art criticism which obviously excludes any more serious deliberation on these pop culture facts, since it disqualifies them immediately as a consequence of the adopted perspective.

We should mention it at least in passing that we deliberately distinguish between culture and art criticism. In our view, both approaches should be respected, yet the boundaries of their “territories” should not be mutually crossed.

It is the task of art criticism to deal with works that aim to incorporate an experiment, innovation, provocation, or just attempt to unify content and form. Paraphrasing Jakobson, the “material” treated by art criticism is its poetic and metalinguistic function.

In our view, the scope of cultural criticism is much broader. It examines culture in its broadest sense in which the cultural is understood as the opposite of the natural. It does not examine whether its subject is formally perfect, beautiful or new but whether it makes cultural sense and may function as a source of meaning beneficial for identities. Could we say, for example, that kebab or sushi are beautiful? Or Skoda 120 or a pair of small white plastic headphones? And yet their existence and meaning represent significant

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7 For instance, serial narratives of the series type do have a closed end. Within a single episode, the narrative develops through Todorov's narrative stages – starting with the state of equilibrium, through its disturbance and the establishment of a new equilibrium. All these stages are thus depleted within a single episode. (see Lacey 2000: 27) They give the impression that the heroes live their lives and stories independently of the televisual depiction, allowing viewers to gain insight into them from time to time thanks to the television. Therefore, the time of the serial narrative of the series type and the time of the audience's everydayness are parallel. In the case of serial narratives of the soap opera type, things are very different: they have an open end and the narrative stages stretch over a certain number of episodes. In the case of the so-called normalization serial, there are usually thirteen episodes, while in the case of the current evening serial drama (which may also be called a prime-time soap opera), such as *Pojišťovna štěstí* (*Good Luck Insurance*), *Rodinná pouta* (*Family Bonds*), *Ordinace v Růžové zahradě* (*Rose Garden Clinic*), or *Nemocnice na kraji města II and III* (*Hospital on the Edge of the City*), they stretch over the whole season. Episodes of serial drama with an open end thus slow down time, since with each episode, the viewer returns to the same moment when they left the characters in the previous episode. In the case of series' characters, one may talk about the effect of “they live their lives elsewhere”, while in the case of serial drama / soap operas, it is the effect of “puppets stored temporarily in a cupboard”. (For the effect of the “puppets in a cupboard”, cf. Oltean 1993: 16)

cultural phenomena of the present day. Paraphrasing Jakobson, cultural criticism is interested in the emotive, phatic, conative and cognitive functions.<sup>8</sup> (Jakobson 1995: 78)

Thus when local dailies and, in many cases, magazines or culture supplements characterize culture only in the sense outlined by the ministry devoted to it, it is a major and long-term misunderstanding regarding what actually constitutes culture.

In our view, television production does not belong to the sphere of art criticism, it belongs fully within the area of cultural criticism, with television serial narratives occupying one of the top positions.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Television serial in the leading role

In the countries where cultural studies flourish, it is customary to defend popular culture as a space which is not harmful, dull and manipulative in its entirety, but also which generates disposable and productive pleasures, meanings and identities. When formulating this thesis in the 1980s, studying television serials played an essential role. We do not find any nationwide fronts opposing the tyranny of popular culture and there are no false assessments of its content according to requirements laid upon high culture even in this intellectual milieu. Yet the dispute over the benefits and corresponding defence of popular culture against cultural elitism has not disappeared. In the Czech environment, there have been petty disputes which, however, cannot grow into a wide debate – examples include the discussion about reality shows in *Literární noviny* at the end of 2005 or the follow-up debate with Vladimír Hendrich broadcast on the Czech Radio 3 – Vltava. (Bendová 2005; Janeček 2005; Šerý 2005)

People are usually reluctant to confess that they like popular culture or even to acknowledge their existence, which is often emphasised by a widespread comment: “I only watch the news and documentaries on the Czech Television 2”.<sup>10</sup> After all, even if we did not feel

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8 According to Jakobson, the poetic function of the work of art is centred around the message, while the metalinguistic one around the code. The emotive function concerns the speaker's expression, the phatic one is associated with the creation of contact, the conative refers to the addressee and the cognitive one refers to a broader context.

9 For instance, soap operas are so-called endless. Their episodes are shot until they generate audiences, thus not having an a priori narrative arc. In principle, they do not exist as a complete piece of work, which means that soap operas cannot be judged according to the classical antique structure of a work of art, i.e. from exposition to catharsis. Other serial narratives do not comply with other requests laid upon works of art. Robert C. Allen describes three reasons why soap operas are judged beforehand within the aesthetic discourse, mentioning three artistic requirements with which soap operas do not comply at all: “First, traditional aesthetics assumes that the aesthetic object should be definable. [...] Second, the work of art is a specific expression of the artist's personality and vision. [...] And third, in order that the audience appreciates the work of art, they have to make some effort. The bigger the effort when attempting to understand the work of art, the higher its value.” (Allen 1985: 13)

10 On the other hand, a similar group of individuals sometimes boasts that they consume genres which the art criticism considers trash. Nevertheless, such statements are not perceived as a defence of popular culture. Rather, they represent an inverse emphasis on the speaker's elite status as someone who is able to, in relation to majority taste, transgress on both sides according to the pattern: “I love works of art that are much more demanding than the majority can cope with” versus “I love much worse trash than the majority population”. The intellectual liking for so-called low-taste contents usually does not concern popular culture but cult works. (One can hardly come across a an intellectual in the field of humanities who would admit watching, for instance, *Četnické humoresky* (*Police Humoresques*) or *My všichni školou povinní* (*All in our School*). However, it is quite common to discuss serial narratives such as *Star Trek*, *Red Dwarf*, *24 Hours*, *Kobra 11*, *Lost*, *Dr. House*, or from domestic production, for example *Návštěvníci* (*Visitors*) or *Spadla z oblaků* (*Fallen from the Sky*) and sometimes *Arabela* or *Rumburak se vrací* (*Rumburak's Return*). Compared to the intellectually absent pop-culture, the above mentioned works can be characterized by a strong hyperbole, paradox or inversion. Therefore, they do not belong to easily accessible texts suitable for the majority. The rehabilitation of such texts is the key effort in “pop-cultural advocacy”. According to Barthes, texts which become part of intellectually emphasised pop-culture and “deal

ashamed, there is no language available for a reliable and convincing defence of popular culture, as concluded in the 1980s by Ien Ang, an analyst of television serial audiences. Opponents of Dallas made use of contemporary obvious arguments against popular culture, pulling out ready-made expressive constructions and statements, whereas its enthusiasts timidly objected that they simply liked it and “who, after all, decides what good culture is?” (Ang 2005: 113) If we adhere to the definition according to which a discourse provides the language to make utterances about a certain type of knowledge, it may be said that the defence of popular culture as a discourse is disadvantaged due to the pre-conceived criticisms. (Crq in Reifová 2004: 46)

Independently of the extent of actual consumption, the contempt for popular culture and a superior attitude to popular contents have become common sense, i.e. what is – without much consideration – regarded as obvious. For instance, two years ago Vladimír Just wrote:

[...] And serials? They have definitely erased the differences (at least in case of so-called “drama programmes”) between commercial and public service television.

I cannot see any essential difference between *Ordinace v Růžové zahradě* (Rose Garden Clinic), *Nemocnice II* (Hospital II) and *Návsí* (Village Square). Excellent actors here and there giving themselves away, Mills and Boon stories here and there, both script and direction, a model textbook of kitsch. [...] The contemporary creators are as corruptible as him (Dietl, author’s comment), they just have not mastered the skill of haggling their goods, complying both to the taste of “those up there” (establishment) and to the taste of general masses. They are only lucky that totalitarianism is over; otherwise they would have eagerly and unscrupulously worked at the command of the ideological committees of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, in the same way as Jaroslav Dietl (although he usually succeeded in mastering the skill). Yet, he was not exceptionally talented, no Shakespeare of television, as it is pointlessly claimed today, rather he was an extraordinarily skilled kitsch-writer. [...] I do not believe that things are different elsewhere – they are only more apt at differentiating between art and kitsch there. I cannot imagine (I am sorry for this rhetorical turn but I really cannot), that the same programmes would be broadcast on ZDF, Arte or RTL.<sup>11</sup>

(Just in Paulas 2006)

The stance of the quoted theatre critic, Vladimír Just, or the documentary film maker and scholar Karel Vachek, clearly belongs to the typology of approaches to culture, explored apart from Raymond Williams by, for instance, John Hartley, which may be labelled

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with” their own textuality are so-called scriptible texts (or writerly in English), being different from the so-called lisible texts (or readerly in English). (Barthes: 2007) (For a complete summary of Czech translations of Barthes’s terms of lisible and scriptible, see Kříž 2007: 101.)

11 All the excerpts have been taken from the interview by Jan Paulas “V. Just: Dietl was an extraordinarily skilled kitsch-writer”, *Katolický týdeník*, 09/2006. Available at <http://www.katyd.cz/index.php?cmd=page&type=11&article=4399>. (27 January 2008)

as the exclusive and inclusive paradigms,<sup>12</sup> owing to allusion. “Just-and-Vachek’s” exclusive paradigm perceives culture as an area which must be incessantly surveyed, removing the inappropriate. In this case, the fight of principle against simple appearance takes place on the front between the “authentic” and “non-authentic” existence. (Vachek 2004) What is essential for this approach is the metaphor of rareness or hygiene: the realm of culture must not include anything inappropriate, it must be constantly surveyed so that it is not contaminated; it must be supervised and the level of its purity checked upon. On the other hand, the inclusive approach perceives culture as a sphere which must include and process as many formats, levels, sources, or practices as possible. It is based on the metaphor of plurality and productive diversity.

The inclusive paradigm is not particularly popular in the Czech environment and that neither in general nor in relation to television serial narratives as locally extremely valuable items of popular culture. Of course, there are (using a sociological term) “islands of positive deviation”, for example the Centre for Audiovisual Studies at the Film and Television School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, or individuals working at the neighbouring Department of Media Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University, and the Institute of Film and Audiovisual Culture in Brno. Magazines open to popular culture include *Cinepur*, *Živel*, occasionally *A2*, *Literární noviny* or *Respekt*.<sup>13</sup>

The notion of democratising culture is also explored in the work of Jaroslav Rudiš, the authors of the Green Raul cartoon in Reflex Magazine. Jiří Lábus and Oldřich Kaiser, the authors of the “endless serial” Tlučořovi (Golem Radio, Limonádový Joe Radio, Frekvence 1, Czech Radio 2, and currently the Internet audiovisual space Stream.cz) have also demonstrated an empathy towards popular culture. What is also worth mentioning is the former and largely unnoticed project carried out by the Prague Public Transport Company and the Literary and Culture Club 8 association entitled *Poetry for Passengers* and distributed on the underground. However, it must be mentioned that within the academia and intellectual élites, the notions of the authenticity and meaningfulness of popular culture genres is paradoxically very rare. For instance, among the majority of their consumers, excluding fan audiences of cult programmes (see footnote 9), many of them who watch serials do not like when somebody watches how they watch...<sup>14</sup> And when indeed somebody watches how they watch, they often state at the beginning that “it’s gonna be rubbish”, yet they continue to watch it... Some attempt to contain serial narratives within the corresponding limits of banality referring to the fact that these are “women’s formats”, this is

12 “Cultural studies ... was to study and practise not just the traditional aesthetics and pursuits of the governors, but *include* in culture as much as possible, indeed everything – the “whole way of life” of a people (as Raymond Williams put it).” (Hartley 2003: 3)

13 In terms of specific publishing or writing activities within this opinion circle, we can point, for example, to developing a very inclusive and integrating approach which refuses to reduce film to a formal and aesthetic matter only, rather it advocates dealing also with the particular period and the local context of film production and consumption. What also deserves attention is the anthology *New film history: anthology of contemporary thinking about the history of cinematography and audiovisual culture* (Szczepanik 2004) or *Cinematography and city: studies of history of local film culture or Questions of film and audiovisual culture*. (both Skopal 2005) The columns on reality shows written by Bendová, Janeček and Šerý for *Lidové noviny* have already been mentioned in the text. It was *Živel* Magazine Vol. 26 that published a relatively extensive piece on serial narratives. (Megaira 2005: 66-69) Also, theses or dissertations dealing with popular culture issues and phenomena have become relatively common in the Czech Republic.

14 We dare claim this despite the fact that there has been no survey of viewing habits exhibited by audiences of domestic serials, this is a lack that affects all in the field. The comment concerns foreign as well as Czech studies and observations. As for foreign surveys, we adopt Alasuutari’s term of “moral hierarchy” and Morley’s term of “viewing guilt”, i.e. feeling guilty because of watching television. (cf. Alasuutari 1992; Morley 1986)

a perfect tautology summarising two forms of snobbery (gender and cultural) in a single sentence. Serial narratives also tend to be lampooned, which also indicates (regardless of the quality of parody) a more or less significant lack of respect to the pleasure evoked by the original. In the same way, it may be said that even culture reviews in dailies (i.e. print media with highest circulation) often speak ironically of television serials. In essence, it may be claimed that the closer we get to the actual empirical base of broadcast serials, the lower the pop-cultural self-confidence and the ability to defend the right to one's pleasure. A strange paradox has thus occurred: the contempt for the so-called mass culture and mass taste has become a mass trend.

### **3. Popular culture as a crossroads of manipulation and creativity**

Within the debate and discussion on popular culture, which is missing on the Czech cultural scene, two distinct views have emerged. Joke Hermes describes them clearly as an emphasis on the determination versus emphasis on the productivity of popular culture. (Hermes 2005: 6) More radical advocates then replace the unambiguously positive productivity with an even more positive resistance. Emphasising the determination refers to the tragic concept of popular culture according to which the consumer of these contents is a priori condemned (determined) to cultural decline due to their (lack of) qualities. The emphasis on determination implies all the theories about the manipulative powers of media, their contribution to legitimising the status quo, media production of consent with dominant ideologies ranging from capitalist to patriarchal ones... The emphasis on productivity then refuses the fact that media contents of any kind could influence the consumer clearly and unambiguously beforehand. In this perspective, all that humans perceive is constantly "re-evaluated" according to their cultural situation. In this sense, the quality of each cultural content corresponds to the quality (or to the quality of purpose) of the way in which they process them. Even watching the formally and aesthetically unacceptable television "trash" may involve significant social and cultural benefits. Therefore, getting acquainted with popular contents is not unambiguously a question of determination and manipulation, but also a question of creation of meanings, identities, pleasures, and the pragmatic use of the watched programmes, unpredictable in advance, i.e. the spheres of actually infinite productivity. The concept of a productive encounter with popular culture claims that the complex of popular contents and their audiences does not necessarily lead to audiences' conformity, rather, on the other hand, it may result in unpredictable adventures when working with meanings. For instance, the advocates of determination would expect that romantic literary or television stories will brainwash their female readers (viewers), pushing them to passively accept patriarchal ideology. On a number of occasions, research has shown that so-called women's contents, even though they include elements of patriarchal dominance, do not reinforce women's submissiveness. Quite the opposite is true: they support self-confidence and resistance. Their contents stimulate and evoke women's gender identity. (Radway 1984) For instance, Tania Modleski in *Loving with a Vengeance* depicts soap operas that – from the perspective of female viewers – function as an emancipation narrative (the plurality of characters reminds the female viewer of the "ideal mother", treating all her children equally; waiting for another episode reveals the phenomenon of waiting as essential women's life experience; or the absence of a great happy ending and the "endlessness" create a counter-balance to the story of the winning masculine hero, etc...). (Modleski 1985)

The book of interviews written by Karel Hviždala (2005) contains a hint at devilish determination from popular culture even in the case of Václav Bělohradský; a suggestion that the role of popular culture is to stultify (in the better case), being only a mask beneath which various ideologies disguised as light-hearted relaxation penetrate the minds and souls of viewers (this is the worse case). Bělohradský provides a bitter description of a widely accepted modus of “focus on identification with the hero of the story”, which he values much lower than the approach based on “the focus on understanding the story”. “In Europe, the culturally higher value is anything that is not focused on the identification of the audience with the hero of the story/message but on understanding the story/message. [...] People identify themselves with heroes of a world that they do not understand.” (Bělohradský in Hviždala 2005: 14) Bělohradský thus presses for a distance from the story and believes that only such an approach to the story may be beneficial, healthy and safe. He reckons that identifying with the hero deprives the individual of the ability to raise difficult questions, so-called improper questions that jeopardise the very essence of the system whose principles they question. (Bělohradský’s “improper questions” are in fact a lay, i.e. non-expert version of Derrida’s deconstruction or Althusser’s symptomatic reading.) The one that identifies with the hero (which is, according to Bělohradský, the antipode of understanding) is in a state of non-critical consciousness, since s/he sees the world through the eyes of the hero, without questioning such a view...

This is Bělohradský’s neat, smooth, logical, and even romantically neo-Marxist version of the conflict between the real understanding of stories and their superficial consumption through characters, which in essence equals conformism. There is only one slight weakness: what Bělohradský offers is itself a story itself and we have to identify with its protagonist to understand it! It is a story with a good and evil world, the hero-philosopher-story-teller being on the good side. I do understand the substance of the story (which is the conflict between depth/essence/pain/ contradiction in European philosophy and superficiality/illusion/pleasure) because I identify with Václav Bělohradský. He embodies this theme; it was him who introduced it at the beginning of the 1990s, taught us to think about it and provided us with the basic elements of the appropriate vocabulary. I identify with him to such an extent that I see the story of the struggle between the surface/hero and the depth/understanding as touching, while it demands my acceptance.<sup>15</sup> Yet, despite this, I still have the ability to raise “improper questions” in relation to this argument of Bělohradský’s. In fact, is real life with its stories so clearly “divided” into two mutually exclusive categories? But above all, is the identification with and understanding of the story so radically incompatible? And is it actually true that those who watch their heroes cannot understand the substance of the story?

Provided that we put aside the thesis of superficial identification and contemplative understanding of value orientation, it may be concluded that understanding without identifying with a hero is not possible at all. We cannot understand the story without prior establishing a relation with a hero. Otherwise, it would be impossible to recognise the narrative as a story. A narrative without a hero is unimaginable, yet at the same time, the importance of the hero in mediated narratives tends to be overrated and demonised. Extensive research on media audiences has shown that even seemingly captivated audiences (for example, by soap opera heroes and plots) are de facto quite cynical, they may

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15 The three sentences preceding footnote 10 are in the singular, since they involve a private conversation with one of the authors, namely Irena Reifová. I apologise for stylistic awkwardness but the passage could not appear in the plural. (Irena Reifová’s note)



act promiscuously towards the heroes, and they, in general, keep a large distance from the rules of narratives – in other words, they understand them... For instance, taking into account the number of characters in soap operas, the identification of the same (male or female) viewer changes over time, with the popular heroes rotating and alternating. The viewers are aware of the “technology” of soap operas (for example the fact that they consist of mainly dialogues in the interior); they know that they are commercial formats, playing the role of fillings between commercial breaks, and above all, they are fully aware that they watch a generally not very highly rated genre, being able to rank it precisely on the scale of the already mentioned moral hierarchies of taste.<sup>16</sup>

There are alternatives to the exclusion paradigm or conviction about the determination imposed by popular culture: Joke Hermes (2005) describes one of the less radical approaches, labelling it “cultural citizenship”.<sup>17</sup> According to the author (inspired by John Hartley), it is the process of creating bonds and establishing a community with a significant contribution of “reading practices”, i.e. decoding the meaning, its breakdown, explanation and criticism, which is often associated with popular texts. It is important that cultural citizenship also includes rights and duties, the same as in the case of the citizenship of a state. Cultural citizenship involves gathering around texts, experiencing pleasures and agreeable meanings – these are benefits from the sphere of rights. On the other hand, it also includes duties and responsibilities, such as a respect for the tastes and meanings acquired by other individuals and communities. (Hermes 2005: 10)

In this perspective, the co-existence with popular culture ceases to be a thoughtless and non-reflective loitering, rather it becomes a social act and an adequate parallel to other social activities, not a subject of denial and shame.

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<sup>16</sup> On audience activity, see for example Ang 1985 or Alasuutari 1992.

<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that more radical approaches to popular culture as an area of consumers' self-defence in the sense of transforming its meanings and experiencing pleasures were fiercely criticised in the first half of the 1990s. See for example Curran 1990 or McGuigan 1992.

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