

Popular Culture in Romania and Bulgaria since the 1960s

Along with pop art, rock & roll is seen as one of the main origins of the pop culture, which emerged in the 1950s and comprised phenomena such as new styles of music and youth cultures¹. Observers at that time initially regarded the new trends as dangerous subcultures, as a youth hazard, and as immoral, while the proponents viewed themselves as a counterculture to existing norms and elitist definitions of culture. In western capitalist countries a commercialization of pop culture occurred very quickly, which often advanced to become mass culture. Ever since, the contrast between sophisticated culture and popular culture has increasingly leveled out, as previously scandal-ridden musicians from the rock, beat or punk scenes are now part of a historical canon. In the cultural sciences, pop culture – as a mirror of social and cultural developments - has been a steadily growing area of research in the past few years. However, current studies often pertain to western industrial societies, as there is little knowledge on Eastern European societies or because many anticipate that there were no such developments under socialism.

But what is exactly pop culture? There are no clear definitions of the term. However, the next few sentences can be read as an attempt at a definition. Popular culture is a multifaceted, global phenomenon that is associated with such attributes as freedom or subversion. It is easily accessible to broad sections of the population, and offers lifestyles that can be adopted or adapted informally and without commitment and which therefore – at least to some extent – remain beyond the reach of political control. Popular culture embraces different music styles, performing arts, cinema,

lifestyles, fashion, literature and even sport. Thus, popular culture has a much stronger link with the everyday experiences of ordinary people than is the case with what might be considered culture in an elitist sense.

The term popular culture can have many different meanings, but it does imply a certain temporal context: first and foremost, it refers to the musical and artistic output of American and British society from the 1950s on, which rapidly spread to different regions of the world through a process of cultural transfer. It did not stop at the iron curtain during the Cold War, but rather reached the Eastern Bloc in real-time. And it did not remain only a western phenomenon, but influenced different subcultures in the Eastern European countries. Furthermore it was closely connected to new technologies for reproducing both sounds and images.

What new insights can popular culture give the reader? It reflects concepts of order, patterns of interaction and shifts in mass culture through the media, consumer goods or cultural transfer. From this point of view, it is possible to analyze processes of negotiation or loyalties between the state and society – as well as cultural practices – that point to the hegemonic concepts, distinction and integration. In the context of strict ideological norms as were prevalent for example in the Soviet Union, GDR, Romania or Bulgaria, pop culture was one factor for political change², as some individuals lost their interest in politics and others became politically emancipated from state concepts. The search for an individual identity, personal styles and tastes was closely connected with free access to media

1 Hecken, Thomas: Pop: Geschichte eines Konzeptes 1955-2009, Bielefeld 2009, p. 271

2 Pekacz, Jolanta: Did rock smash the wall? The Role of Rock in Political Transition, in: Popular Music 13, 1994, No. 1, p. 41ff.

and consumer goods as well with the idea of personal freedom. However, in daily life such demands were limited by the political system. People refused to be indoctrinated and developed a sense of self-will [*Eigensinn*]. Another aspect of pop culture is its close relationship to youth culture and the efforts of young people to distinguish themselves from older generations and to cross social borders.

Besides theoretical approaches from sociology in the past 40 years³, initially efforts were undertaken to understand Eastern European pop cultures immediately after the fall of communism⁴. In recent years new interesting publications have again appeared with a main focus on the GDR and the Soviet Union and, in particular on urban centers like Berlin, Leipzig, Moscow and Leningrad. However, in cities and regions beyond the center vibrant subcultures, music scenes and youth cultures existed as well, as Sergej Zhuk and William Risch demonstrated in their books about Soviet Ukraine⁵.

In 2013, an edited volume was published which deals with less researched countries in

Eastern Europe⁶. The editors understand pop culture as an escape from the monotony of everyday socialism:

*"It is important for students of Eastern European history to understand that people living under communism constantly sought ways to challenge the system from within on an everyday basis."*⁷

However, Bulgaria and Romania are still under-researched. Therefore, this edition of *Euxeinos* aims to provide insights into the latest projects. You will find three articles in this issue, one on Romania and two on Bulgaria covering the period from the 1960s till today.

Nela Gheorghica deals with Romanian film production and cinema culture under communism. According to the Leninist dictum, cinema was an important form of art which could reach the masses. Like in other socialist countries, the film industry and cinema production were therefore nationalized in Romania in 1948 in order to exploit and control mass culture for political purposes. Even though it turned away from the Soviet Union after 1968, the functionalization and censorship of this cultural sphere by the state remained unchanged. Nevertheless, there were a number of foreign and western productions in the 1960s and 1970s in particular, which were shown with only minor restrictions.

The ethnologist Yana Yancheva explores the phenomenon of rock culture in small Bulgarian cities from the 1960s to today. Almost simultaneously to western societies, rock culture also emerged there as a youth movement and as an urban sub-culture which quickly spread. The motivation to participate could be seen as an attempt to escape from the govern-

3 Horkheimer, Max/Adorno, Theodor Wiesengrund: *Dialektik der Aufklärung: philosophische Fragmente*, Frankfurt a.M. 1969; Fiske, John: *Understanding popular culture*, London 2006

4 Troickij, Artemij: *Tusovka: Who's Who in the New Soviet Rock Culture*, London 1990; Ramet, Sabrina Petra (Ed.): *Rocking the State: Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia*, Boulder (Colo.) 1994; Ryback, Timothy W.: *Rock around the Bloc: a History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, New York 1990

5 Risch, William Jay: *The Ukrainian West: Culture and the Fate of Empire in Soviet Lviv*, Cambridge, Mass. 2011; Zhuk, S.I.: *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: the West, Identity and Ideology in Soviet Dnepropetrovsk, 1960-1985*, Washington, D.C 2010

6 Giustino, Cathleen M: *Socialist Escapes: Breaking Away from Ideology and Everyday Routine in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989*, New York 2013

7 Giustino, Cathleen, p. 2

ment's ideas on lifestyle, leisure activities, and cultural norms and to create a counterculture, while also distinguishing oneself from other forms of mass culture. In return, adherents to this sub-culture were villainized as being decadent, immoral, or uncultivated – arguments which simultaneously were made in other societies as well. As a result, the communist Bulgarian government aimed to expand its control over the rock scene, which led to even more resistant and politicized behavior among the adherents:

“We wanted to show them we didn't care about those shitty ideologies and norms of behavior. That was it.”⁸

The period of analysis of Yancheva's study is also interesting, because it does not end with the collapse of communism in 1991, rather also comprises the period of transformation. The allure of the forbidden abruptly ended when democratization began, as previously forbidden or inaccessible music and fashion were now allowed.

Vihra Bahrova focuses on sub-cultural developments since the 1990s in Bulgaria. She also conducted field research in the city of Plovdiv in 2012 as a participating observer. While the resistance to governmental standardization and censorship was an important aspect of group formation and participation, the search for identity and for an own style appears to have become more important since the beginning of democratization. On the basis of her ethnological method, Bahrova conveys actors' perspectives, refers to distinctive features such as clothing, taste in music or hairstyles and provides insights on the quick dynamics related to group formations and group switching. Another finding pertains to gender issues, as young men are more frequently members of

8 quote from the article by Yana Yancheva, p. 21

sub-cultural scenes than women.

All three articles, which were written exclusively for this issue of *Euxeinos*, offer contemporary insights on marginalized regions of Europe and highlight transnational possibilities of comparison and research gaps, while also sharing knowledge with interested readers on Eastern European societies and previously conducted research on them.

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