

THE LIFE AND AFTERLIFE OF A SOCIALIST MEDIA FRIEND

ON THE LONG-TERM CULTURAL RELEVANCE OF THE POLISH TV SERIES CZTERDZIESTOLATEK

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Abstract: This paper analyses the cultural relevance of the popular Polish 1970s series *Czterdziestolatek* ('The Forty Year Old'). It aspires to reconstruct both public discourses about the episodes produced during socialism and the reception of a new season after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Furthermore, the concept of the mnemonic imagination (Keightley and Pickering) will be applied to memory and nostalgia about the series. The study argues that this Polish 'media-friend' (Meyrowitz) went through three overlapping reception-phases: a critical public discourse and extreme popularity among the audience during socialism, the lack of enthusiasm for the post-socialist season and finally the programme's establishment among historical televisual documents that are perceived as Polish cultural heritage.

Keywords: Poland, Nostalgia, Television Series, Mnemonic Imagination, Media Friends

1 Meeting Media Friends From The Cold War Era

Ever since television has established itself as an institution in global living rooms, the role and impact of the characters inhabiting this medium on reality led to both public discourses and scientific analyses. Joshua Meyrowitz¹ has coined a central analytical concept in this respect, that of a lifelong 'media friend'. In a Western context, he shows how audience members develop unilateral relationships with celebrities and fictional characters and argues that these relations are a fixed part of the emotional and social spheres in which people live their lives and negotiate their identities. His research confirms the cultural relevance of 'media friends' in modern societies and their close integration into individual lives.² This article aims to extend Markowitz's scope of analysis geo-politically to an ex-socialist country. It evaluates the long-term relationship and the cultural relevance of such a 'media friend' in the

1 Joshua Meyrowitz, 'The Life and Death of Media Friends: New Genres of Intimacy and Mourning', in: Susan J. Drucker and Robert S. Cathcart, eds, *American Heroes in a Media Age*, New York: Hampton Press, 1994, p. 62-81

2 The cultural particularity of the audience's relationship to their 'media friends' has recently been explored by Bourdon and Kligler-Vilenchik in a survey on Israel. See Jérôme Bourdon and Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, 'Together, nevertheless? Television Memories in mainstream Israel', *European Journal of Communication*, 26 (1), p. 33-47.

context of the societal circumstances and changes experienced in Poland before and after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Researching the Polish population's relationship to an exemplary selection of their fictional peers requires a three-dimensional approach. Initially, the original series' structural parameters will be analysed. This will be followed by an investigation of different angles of reception. The analysis will be based on a hermeneutical approach, resorting to a variety of primary sources. Both the engagement with the reception of the post-socialist season and the long-term memory about the programme require an additional set of tools addressing issues related to studying memory and nostalgia, all of which will be outlined in the following.

2 Limits And Insights From Sources Engaging With Socialist Media Friends

An increasing number of historical studies engage with the contemporary impact of television programmes on societal issues and political trends featuring various genres, such as sitcom, animal documentary and realist mini-series.³ Meanwhile, for a long time, the analysis of television and memory has been neglected due to the notion that television was an a-historical medium.⁴ All of the studies referenced above illuminate television's influence on both the audience and public discourses. However, this is mainly in a Western context. Nevertheless, engagement with popular television from Eastern Europe is currently increasing.⁵ In the context of an analysis concentrating on mediated mnemonic imagination, it is crucial to note that many historical works on the Eastern European media have stressed the unifying character of socialist televisual fiction.⁶

In this case study I intend to contribute to the growing corpus of research on popular television in formerly socialist countries. I will explore how the audience's relationship to Jerzy Gruza's popular Polish television series about a middle class family in Warsaw - *Czterdziestolatek* or *40-latek* ('The Forty Year Old')⁷ - developed since its initial broadcast in 1974-1978. Comparing contemporary reactions from the 1970s to memory and nostalgia after the fall of the Iron Curtain, this paper aspires to analyse how the engagement with the series has changed over almost four decades. As it is one of the few programmes from Polish socialism whose fictional population continued their life on the screen in a new season in 1993 - *40-latek 20 lat później* ('The Forty Year Old 20 Years Later')⁸ - it provides the unique opportunity to capture discourses related to the continuation of fictional *media friends*' in a new political and economic system. The central aim of this study is to evaluate the cultural relevance of a TV series in a transitional society and to capture how the fictional interpretation of everyday life in socialism was perceived throughout time.

In order to select the suitable primary sources to approach these issues, it is necessary to define the spaces in which both ad-hoc reactions to the television series and nostalgic recollections took place and to evaluate the availability of primary sources. The first space to consider in the analysis of contemporary reactions is of course the home. As outlined in numerous ethnographic studies from different cultural contexts, people do engage with television in their homes in various ways ranging from silent and highly concentrated viewing to empathic cries of encouragement for the characters on screen.⁹ The reactions are influenced by individual experiences as well as by the cultural reception

3 Christina von Hodenberg, 'Ekel Alfred und die Kulturrevolution', *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, Sept./Oct. 2011, p. 557-572; Jens Ivo Engels, 'Von der Sorge um die Tiere zur Sorge um die Umwelt. Tiersendungen als Umweltpolitik in Westdeutschland zwischen 1950 und 1980', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 43, 2003, p. 297-323; Kinga Bloch, 'Realism bites! The Impact of a Fictional Teen Suicide on West German Public Debates in the 1980s', *Opticon*, 13 (Special Issue: Fragile Realities) 2012, <http://www.opticon1826.com/article/view/opt.as/220>, Accessed 20 May 2013

4 Amy Holdsworth, 'Televisual Memory', *Screen*, 51, 2, Summer 2010, p. 130. She addresses this research gap in an impressive study on Britain. See Amy Holdsworth, *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

5 Aniko Imre, Timothy Havens and Katalin Lustyik, eds, *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism*, Routledge, 2013

6 Dorota Ostrowska, 'The Carnival of the Absurd. Stanislaw Bareja's *Alternatywy 4* and Polish Television in the 1980s', in Imre et al, eds, 2013, p. 76. Other examples can be found in Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic Books, 2001, p. 61 and Aniko Imre, *Identity Games. Globalization and the Transformation of Media Cultures in the New Europe*, MIT Press, 2009, p. 76. The latter highlights the unifying function of *Krtek*, Zdenek Miler's little mole, across the generation of East Europeans who spent their childhood in the last 20 years of socialism.

7 The following sources have been used for audiovisual analyses and plot summaries: Discs 1-6, *40-latek*: Kompletne Wydanie, TVP & Galapagos Films, 2007 and *40-latek*, 14 December 2012, <http://www.filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php/123482>, Accessed 20 May 2013

8 The following sources have been used for audiovisual analyses and plot summaries: Discs 1-6, *40-latek 20 lat później*: Kompletne Wydanie, TVP & Galapagos Films, 2010 and *40-latek 20 lat później*: 14 December 2012, <http://www.filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php/125727>

9 Compare J. Tulloch, *Watching Television Audiences: Cultural Theories and Methods*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2000

context. Sociologists working at *OBOP* - Ośrodek Badań Opinii Publicznej (Institute for Analysing the Public Opinion) - during socialism were active in researching the relationship between the Polish audience and television series. Their ethnographic studies analyse the reception of television series throughout the 1970s and 1980s, however there is no research that specifically focuses on *40-latek*.¹⁰ Having retrospective access to Polish living rooms from the time the series were broadcast proves to be limited. However, there are alternative sources that can be accessed: the response of the press to the programme, which included selected voices from the audience; interviews with the director and actors; film critics' and journalists' impressions; and finally the minutes of a public discussion between the producers, actors and various stakeholders attached to the Polish building industry. While it is impossible to collect all articles written about *40-latek* in Poland, both the FilMOTEKA Narodowa¹¹ and the Polish TV-archive¹² hold regionally diversified press collections that provide a good insight into different perspectives on the series. The complementary holdings from both archives consist of 90 articles, which were approached by means of a qualitative content analysis.¹³ In terms of scope and size, the sample corresponds with collections on other popular Polish television series and documents on similar programmes from the GDR.¹⁴ The use of published opinions from a socialist country always requires an awareness of the censorship and self-censorship that was prevalent in Eastern European states to varying degrees during the Cold War. Nevertheless, issues that were criticised openly as well as themes that were not mentioned publicly might give access to elements of the TV series that were regarded to hold a controversial potential. When we read these sources against the grain and use them together with both audience memories and documented statements made by the actors and the director, they can be used in an indicative manner to reconstruct audience reactions in the 1970s. Furthermore, audio-visual material preserved on DVDs as well as plot summaries contained in the database of the [Polish National Film, Television and Theatre School](#) were also referenced in the analysis.

Primary sources on current memory and on the 1993 resurrection of the *Karwowski* family are more diverse than the materials from the 1970s. Press coverage on repetitions of *40-latek* as well as on the new series form a significant, albeit smaller cluster of documents. Popular literature on cult-series from the PRL,¹⁵ popular science anthologies on everyday life in socialist Poland¹⁶ and icons from this period¹⁷ provide further insights. Even though a thorough and multi-layered source analysis of internet forums on the series, comments and hits on YouTube clips proves to be impossible due to the often obscure authorship of these documents, they can be used to verify statements from the other source genres. Last but not least, the author conducted 23 interviews focusing on memories about watching television, focusing on a selection of popular and controversial TV series in 2012 Poland.¹⁸ The corpus of recorded interviews is geographically diverse with a bias on Słupsk (11 interviews). However, it also contains representatives from Warsaw (5), Wrocław (2), Łowicz Wałęcki (2), Gdansk (1), Toruń (1) and Silesia (1). The participants were acquired snowballing my query through regional multipliers such as a primary school teacher, a beauty salon, rural homestays, friends and family. Even though the sample can hardly be called representative, it still features Poles

10 Dzięcioławska, 1975; H. Rudnik, 'Serial „Droga” w opinii widzów Warszawskich', *Aktualności Radiowo Telewizyjne*, 1975 (5), p. 13-18 and H. Rudnik, 'Opinie widzów o serialu „Alternatywy 4"', *Aktualności Radiowo Telewizyjne*, 1987 (3), p. 5-11

11 FilMOTEKA Narodowa, Wycinki Prasowe, *Czterdziestolatek* 1974-today and FilMOTEKA Narodowa, Wycinki Prasowe, *Czterdziestolatek 20 lat później*, 1993-today.

12 TVP, Dzia Dokumentacji, Wycinki Prasowe, *Czterdziestolatek*, 1974-today and TVP, Dzia Dokumentacji, Wycinki Prasowe, *Czterdziestolatek 20 lat później*, 1993-today

13 In the paper, representative opinions from these collections will be quoted. Trends and opinion clusters were defined based upon the entire collections.

14 This information is based upon research on 8 popular television series from the former GDR (*Aus dem Tagebuch eines Minderjährigen*, *Die lieben Mitmenschen*, *Aber Vati!*, *Rentner haben niemals Zeit*, *Familie Neumann*, *Geschichten überm Gartenzaun*, *Fridolin* and *Barfuß ins Bett*) at the Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv Babelsberg and the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen Konrad Wolf and socialist Poland (*Wojna Domowa*, *Sami Swoi-Trilogy*, *Daleko od Szosy*, *Czterdziestolatek*, *Jan Serce*, *Rodzina Leśniewskich*, *Alternatywy 4* and *Dekalog*) that was conducted for my forthcoming comparative PhD project which includes East and West Germany as well as Poland. While the press coverage on West German series differs from the formerly socialist samples, the discourses there are similar in terms of geographical distribution and the way issues were addressed.

15 Piotr K. Piotrowski, *Kultowe Seriale*, Prószyński i S-ka, 2011

16 Wiesław Kot, *PRL jak cudnie się żyło*, publicat, 2008.

17 Jarosław Talacha, *Ikony PRL Bohaterowie Tamtych Lat*, DEMART, 2011

18 My fieldwork was approved by UCL's Ethic's Commission (3033/001) and follows the British Data Protection Act 1998. All interviewees were allocated individual codes and pseudonyms that will be used throughout the text. Once I finish my PhD project all interviews and transcripts will be handed to the Deutsches Rundfunk Archiv in Babelsberg for further use in research. All quotes given in this paper were translated by the author and represent the content of the statements rather than a direct translation.

with diverse backgrounds in terms of education¹⁹, occupation²⁰, family origin²¹, generation²² and gender²³ (8 men, 15 women). The open interviews were conducted within the frame of a two-part questionnaire. Initially, the participants were asked about their general memories of television in the PRL. This part aimed at recording free associations the viewers had with television during socialism. Afterwards, the interviewees were asked to phrase their memories about eight popular and controversial series including *40-latek* in case the participant did not mention it before²⁴. While the results from my fieldwork can certainly not stand on their own, they complement the information available in the other sources mentioned above and will be used as such.

All sources engaging with the post-socialist reception of *40-latek* show distinct patterns requiring a specific analytical framework that deviates from the traditional oral history approach. First and foremost, the relationship to the series expressed in the interviews and online forums is situated in a specific moment of time and therefore determined by the interviewees' experiences after the fall of the Iron Curtain.²⁵ Their biography certainly influences their retrospective readings of the fictional presentation of everyday life on socialist television and this needs to be taken into consideration while analysing their statements.²⁶ Secondly, the continuity of the series in the Polish mass media in the form of repetitions of the original series, circulated in the news and on the Internet extends the mediated encounter with the fictional peers from the past into the present. The series' presence in public discourses also confirms that the relation to the *Karowski* family is embedded into a societal context and cannot be reduced to individual experiences.²⁷ Generally speaking, every comment on a fictional interpretation of the past refers to a mediated experience. It is therefore unavoidably related to factual experiences in an imaginative way. This implies a creative selection of the programme's aspects, which are most suitable to fit one's own biographical narrative.²⁸ This selective process of memory can also be observed in nostalgic statements related to aspects of socialist everyday life shown in the series; none of the interviewees claimed to be nostalgic about the Gierek era per se but about very specific experiences and feelings linked to their life in the 1970s.²⁹ All of these observations support choosing Keightley and Pickering's concept of the mnemonic imagination³⁰ as an analytical tool to approach a society's retrospective engagement with a mediated interpretation of the quotidian.

In brief, it can be said that even though the historiographical analysis of discourses on a TV series from the 1970s proves to be challenging, it is not entirely impossible. However, it is necessary to apply a diversified body of primary materials - including interviews and online sources - in addition to archival documents as well as contemporary press and research material. Reading the available sources against the grain proves to be crucial for such an endeavour, while applying different disciplinary angles of analysis to the source materials allows for significant insights into reconstructed and remembered audience reactions to audiovisual interpretations of their everyday-life.³¹

19 12 interviewees hold a university degree while 10 completed vocational training.

20 The occupations range from stay-at-home mother, unemployed people, pensioners, teachers to business owners, bakers, manual labourers and engineers.

21 There was no clear trend among the occupation of the participant's family of origin; however the participants born in the 1970s often held a higher degree than their parents.

22 Distribution of male participants (birth decades): late 1930s/ early 1940s -2, 1950s - 2, 1960s - 1, early 1970s - 3. Distribution of female participants: 1940s - 2, 1950s - 2, 1960s - 5 with a slight bias towards the 1970s - 6 participants.

23 8 men, 15 women.

24 A list of all series considered can be found in footnote 12

25 Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, *The Mnemonic Imagination. Remembering as a Creative Practice*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 20

26 *Ibid.*, p. 10 and 25

27 *Ibid.*, p. 76

28 *Ibid.*, p. 36f

29 *Ibid.*, p. 112-138

30 Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, *The Mnemonic Imagination. Remembering as a Creative Practice*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012

31 Compare: C. von Hodenberg, 'Expeditionen in den Methodendschungel. Herausforderungen der Zeitgeschichtsforschung im Fernsehzeitalter', *Journal of Modern European History*, 10.1 (January 2012), p. 24-48

3 Pickling Polish Everyday Life Or The Most Famous Midlife-Crisis Of The 1970s

40-latek is a comedy series about the midlife crisis of a Polish middle class engineer, *Stefan Karwowski* who is very proud of his work, his wife *Madzia* (Anna Seniuk) - a manager for the city's waterworks - and their two children attending school (*Jagoda* and *Marek*). *Karol* (Leonard Pietraszak), a doctor and *Stefan's* best friend is introduced as a close friend of the family and is often involved in the family's issues. Another key character is played by actress Irena Kwiatkowska. She impersonates the *Kobieta Pracująca* (The Working Woman) who gives advice to the family on a specific issue in every single episode. The Working Woman never appears in the same profession twice and can be interpreted as a walking advice centre based upon her vast work and life experience. Finally, the geodesist *Maliniak*, an annoying little man who always tries to get everybody's attention and gets involved in important issues at work, enjoyed significant popularity despite or rather due to his extremely annoying character.³² [The Polish TV Broadcasting Agency's \(TVP\) website](#) gives a visual impression of the family members and their peers.

The series is set in a fictional interpretation of the early Gierek era featuring its typical material circumstances as well as prestigious construction projects of this time. Engineer Karwowski takes part in the construction of the new highways in Warsaw (Trasa Łazienkowska and Trasa Toruńska) and the central train station (Dworzec Centralny). In addition to visual impressions of these projects, the opening sequence also gives insights into the contemporary street-life in Warsaw. The intro enhances viewers' sense of realism from the very first minute of every episode, which is also emphasized by Rosewicz's famous [song *40 lat minelo*](#) ('40 years have passed by').³³

[Video 1.](#)

The first season (1974) opens with *Stefan's* 40th birthday party and includes narratives which mostly relate to personal or family issues such as ageing, quitting nicotine, extramarital relations, death, the loss of hair and a honorary post in the real estate block where the *Karwowski* family lives. In contrast to the setting of the first seasons, the subsequent sets of episodes deal with both *Stefan's* and *Madzia's* work to a greater extent. The structure of the *Karwowski* family represents the typical model of the Gierek era.³⁴ Even though their education, career and the material equipment of their household are slightly above average, they are not necessarily perceived as an atypical family, at least in the first season. In terms of their material possessions, they have access to anything a Pole could dream of in the 1970s: a new Fiat Polski, a modern flat (M3), a coloured TV-set. Both parents follow a steep career path, especially the father who becomes a director in the second season.³⁵

Dorota Ostrowska places *40-latek* into the Polish "block of flats genre", arguing that it was "very popular because it addressed a central problem for Poles – that of housing."³⁶ While this is the case to a certain extent, the rather general evaluation of *40-latek* in her otherwise brilliant analysis of the highly satirical 1980s series *Alternatywy 4* ('Alternative Street 4') includes two problematic observations. First of all, she puts *40-latek* into the same category as *Rodzina Leśniewskich*³⁷ suggesting that they belong to the same genre.³⁸ Considering the fact that the latter series was aimed at children and screened in the teleranek (morning programme for children broadcast in the weekends), this categorisation is slightly misleading. While both plots are situated in a Warsaw block of flats, the content of the *Leśniewski* series is aimed at entertaining children, which differs strongly from any programme dealing with everyday adult themes. Secondly, she implies that *40-latek* was the story of a model Pole under socialism and that the series

32 Jerzy Gruza, *Telewizyjny Alfabet Wspomnień*, Warsaw: Muza, 2000, p. 42-43 describes a situation in which the actor was associated with his the role he played in the series. In the same book, he also elaborates on the surprising popularity of the mean character (p. 146).

33 A rough translation of the lyrics is available on http://www.tekstowo.pl/piosenka.andrzej_rosiewicz.40_lat_minelo.html. Accessed 20 May 2013

34 Ostrowska, 2013, p. 76 and Kot, 2008 p. 98

35 Majer, 2005, p. 218 entitles *Stefan* to be the PRL's 'everyman', the average Pole from a big city while Talacha, 2011, p. 68-69 emphasises the material wealth and distinct career path of the *Karwowski* family

36 Ostrowska, 2013, p. 76

37 See <http://www.filmipolski.pl/fp/index.php/124139>, Accessed 20 May 2013

38 Ostrowska 2013, p. 69

only focused on the problems of a modern Polish family in the 1970s while *Alternatywy 4* used the material failures in a modern housing estate as “an allegory for socialist Poland *tout court*.”³⁹ Indeed *Alternatywy 4* was undoubtedly the more radical programme in terms of criticising the living circumstances in socialist Poland. However, there are significant elements of socio-political criticism - including housing and material living conditions - that are prevalent in *40-latek*.⁴⁰ One scene in episode 15 *Kosztowny Drobiazg, czyli Rewizyta* (49:55-52:02) offers a striking example: it shows the lack of professional ethics among construction workers who ask for drinks and snoop around for alcohol in the flat.

All critical references to contemporary socio-political issues in *40-latek* have something in common: they are humorously integrated into each plot. In consequence Ostrowska's evaluation of *40-latek* as being conformist and her conclusion that *Alternatywy 4* was the first programme depicting problematic issues - such as failed plumbing - requires a re-evaluation. While *40-latek* certainly promoted the successes of socialist Poland in the Gierek era, there were also critical undertones voiced in the programme. Furthermore, the dire state of housing was also addressed in both humorous and serious ways in other series screened before *Alternatywy 4* such as *Wojna Domowa*,⁴¹ *Daleko od Szosy*⁴² and to a certain extent also in *Jan Serce*.⁴³

From a historical perspective it is possible to conclude that the series realistically captured the living circumstances of a slightly above average family in Warsaw in the early 1970s. The setting includes a wide variety of images from everyday life: be it traffic in the city, construction projects, the items in the family's flat and workplaces and occasionally even people waiting in queues in front of the shops. The setting can be regarded as an audio-visual preserve of every-day life that has documentary value through the material culture, imagery of the city and living circumstances it presents. Furthermore, the satirical engagement with daily issues in socialist Poland provides insights into everyday phenomena that were widely perceived as defining the Gierek era.

4 Reading Between The Lines Of Contemporary Discourses On 40-latek

Researchers on Polish television agree with contemporary observations that the audience liked the programme very much.⁴⁴ Similarly to widely appreciated Polish-costume dramas,⁴⁵ *40-latek* was adapted for the big screen in 1976.⁴⁶ The main reason for taking pleasure in *40-latek* was that it was funny and entertaining.⁴⁷ Furthermore, viewers expressed that they could identify with *Stefan* based upon their own experiences. Two 40-year old men emphasise the series' proximity to life in 1975 as follows: “... many issues are entertaining and real at the same time” and “That is just

39 Ibid, p. 76

40 This is confirmed by Artur Majer, 'Czterej pancerni i Czterdziestolatek, czyli o małżeństwie romantyzmu i małą stabilizacją', in Wiesława Godzica, ed, *30 Najważniejszych programów TV w Polsce*, Wydawnictwo Trio, 2005, p. 218f in a general evaluation of the series' popularity.

41 Issues with sanitary installations (the water tap) are depicted as soon as the late 1960s in the first Polish family series *Wojna Domowa*. The handymen who come in to mend the leaking water tap end up destroying the entire bathroom. See <http://www.film Polski.pl/fp/index.php/123751> episode 9 Dzień Matki, Accessed 20 May 2013

42 Housing issues are also prevalent in the 1976 story about Leszek from a rural area who works his way upwards benefiting from the educational opportunities given to peasants in socialist Poland. Even though he succeeds on his path, he experiences the hardships caused by the housing shortage, with his wife and young child being forced to live in a single room without kitchen or bathroom during winter. The little apartment is depicted with all its flaws as is the rural area from which Leszek originates. See also: <http://www.film Polski.pl/fp/index.php/123417>, Accessed 20 May 2013

43 The main protagonist in this 1981 series moves into a new block of flats eventually. Even though his flat is immaculate, the outside of the building is still under construction and in a very ugly state. Prior to his move to the new flat, he lived in an alcove in his mother's apartment waiting for the allocation of a modern flat. The mother's apartment is in a dire state and none of the imagery used in the series aspires to hide the darkness and less than ideal living circumstances. See also <http://www.film Polski.pl/fp/index.php/123578>, Accessed 20 May 2013.

44 It won several acclaimed prizes, most of them in 1976, the year after the first season was screened. A complete list of awards can be found under: <http://www.film Polski.pl/fp/index.php/123482>, Accessed 20 May 2013

45 Dorota Ostrowska and Małgorzata Radkiewicz, 'POLAND: Costume Dramas: cine-telvisual alliances in the socialist and post-socialist Poland, in: Dorota Ostrowska and Graham Roberts, eds., *European Cinemas in the Television Age*, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, p. 107-124. Cinema versions of contemporary Polish TV series located in an everyday-setting were not as common as wide-screen adaptations of costume dramas, however they can be observed in at least two more cases: the childrens' programme *Rodzina Leśniewskich* and Kieślowski's *Dekalog*.

46 For further details on 'Motylem jestem' see: <http://www.film Polski.pl/fp/index.php/12340>, Accessed 20 May 2013

47 The initial impact of the series is captured in contemporary sources such as Tadeusz Szczepański, in ODGŁOSY, *Powrót "Czterdziestolatka"*, 4 December 1975, Stefania Dzięcioławska, 'Polski serial telewizyjny - czynniki aprobaty ze strony odbiorców', *Aktualności Radio-Telewizyjne*, 22, 30 September 1975, p. 11 and Jacek Fuksiewicz, *Film i Telewizja w Polsce*, Warsaw: Interpress, 1981, p. 209-210. Recent historiographical research confirms their impressions: Majer, 2005, p. 217; Andrzej Kozieł, *Za chwilę dalszy ciąg programu... Telewizja Polska Czterech Dekad 1952-1989*, Warsaw: Oficyna, 2003, p. 169 and Katarzyna Pokorna-Ignatowicz, *Telewizja w systemie politycznym i medialnym PRL, Między polityką a widzami*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2003, p. 140.

the way life is!”⁴⁸ Four other viewers also refer exclusively to issues from the personal realm whilst outlining their level of identification with the main protagonist. His work is not in the focus of their reflections, which concentrate on ageing, fashion, hair-loss and gaining weight. This perspective changed when the series started featuring more main plots related to work. In contrast to Majer’s observation of the series’ contemporary reception as a grotesque and satirical image of contemporary Poland,⁴⁹ the sources indicate that an initially positive opinion about the narrative turned critical in the second and third season. Meanwhile, there were still positive voices among the comments in the newspapers, such as that of the head of the ŁPBP (the Łódź Enterprise for Industrial Building), Jerzy M. who claims that he recognizes many of his own problems watching *Stefan’s* stories on screen in 1978.⁵⁰ Contrary to this opinion, Antoni M., a former construction worker assumes that the director of the film does not know anything about construction.⁵¹ At the core of the evolving criticism was the perception of an exaggerated humour. Furthermore viewers lamented that the programme was increasingly unrealistic, which culminated in the accusation that the main characters *Stefan* and *Madzia* evolved into “stereotypical idiots.”⁵²

The decline of public approval went along with the change of the series’ focus from personal matters to work issues. The source materials highlight the correlation as a possible explanation for a change in attitudes towards the series. Both criticism on a professional level as shown in a debate with employees from the construction business as well as a rejection of unfamiliar behaviour linked to the *Karwowski’s* professional ascent⁵³ were mentioned as reasons for the increasing distance experienced among viewers. While this is what was suggested by the newspaper sources - which were possibly censored and definitively selective in the compilation of readers’ opinions for publication - there might be an alternative path of evolution to the publicly constructed linear decline of approval. First of all it is remarkable that the elements criticised in the public discourse coincided with the space affected by most of the censorship decisions currently accessible to researchers, namely scenes related to work and politics. The original protocols are documented and accessible on the [TVP homepage](#).

Another indicator suggesting that the public evaluation of the series did not necessarily coincide with the majority of private opinions is reflected in the memories of both actors and other people involved in the production of the programme. Director Jerzy Gruza highlights in his memoirs⁵⁴ that while the audience appreciated the series, it never got any positive press reviews. While the latter statement can be contradicted by the analysis of press over time, this still shows that parts of the public liked *40-latek*. The programme’s success is also confirmed by the lead actors, first and foremost *Stefan Karwowski* (Andrzej Kopiczyński). In addition to numerous newspaper interviews given by the actor, a vivid description of the initial season’s success is captured in a TV interview conducted with him and Gruza celebrating the series’ 36th birthday:

[Video 2.](#)

Finally, several work-related episodes and constellations have been remembered positively by the viewers interviewed in 2012, which also suggests that Gruza’s satirical interpretation of the 1970s business world was enjoyed by some audience members. One example is Jadwiga (PF1566) from Warsaw, who described the entertaining value of the depiction of a work-related visit to Hungary: “Back then everybody in Warsaw laughed about giving away Polish crystals as business gifts. It was simply hilarious when Stefan tried to buy one of them in Budapest instead of trying to trade it in for other goods. Receiving the same item in return from the host of the delegation was the peak of the whole story.” Even though she was a young teenager at the time, she recalled that this particular work-related episode had an entertainment value beyond the story itself. Other work-related storylines remembered were the chaos on the

48 Kurier Polski, *A co Pan o tym myśli?...*, 6 July 1975.

49 Majer, 2005, p. 218

50 Dziennik Populamy, *Co nasi Czytelnicy myślą o... nowej serii “Czterdziestolatka”*, 23 January 1978

51 Ibid. Further examples for the critical engagement of people working in the construction business are expressed in the protocol of a discussion round printed in FUNDAMENTY, *Spotkanie Dyskusyjne. “CZTERDZIESTOLATEK” przed “TRYBUNAŁEM”*, 19 March 1978.

52 Włodzimierz L. and Włodzimierz K. express their outrage and a deep regret about the evolution of the Karwowski couple in the last season in ODGŁOSY, *Matysiakowie wyszli z opłotków... a co my na to?*, 12 March 1978. A similar opinion was voiced by Wojciech Roszewski in ARGUMENTY, *Zimny Ogień*, 22 January 1978.

53 Examples for „non-average” experiences of Poles in the 1970s are: a female work assistant who has work experience from Japan (12); being promoted by a computer programme at work (13); noble and pretentious work dinners among directors (15) and travelling abroad on an official delegation (Episode 17).

54 Jerzy Gruza, *40 lat minelo jak jeden dzień*, Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1998, p. 411 and Jerzy Gruza, 2000, p. 196-198

construction sites and the ways the nomenclature was depicted.⁵⁵

On the one hand, one cluster of sources shows that part of the audience liked the series a lot and gained pleasure from the humoristic depiction of everyday life in the Gierek era. On the other hand, there were also critical audience members, whose opinions are known to us through the examples selected by the official press. Their opinions were more in line with the authorities' dismissive perspective on mocking the professional life of those who were building up socialism in 1970s Poland. The latter was also reflected in the selection of plots affected by censorship and also expressed by many journalists and critics in relation to *40-latek's* second and third season. While it will remain impossible to know the distribution of these two differing perspectives among the population, we can assume that there was a split among the audience. In conclusion, it can be said that pickling preserves of the past in the format of a TV series included bitter, critical ingredients, which were rejected in public discourses and by the authorities while a significant group appreciated them.

5 Yesterday's Lunch Or An Exciting New Dish? 40-latek's Resurrection In The Post-Socialist World

The fourth season of *40-latek* ('20 years later') is set in the free market economy of the early 1990s. The narrative continues the work-oriented setting of the last seasons from the 1970s. Contemporary observers noted that the reception of this experiment was not very enthusiastic, far from the level of interest the series caused in the Gierek era. Piotrowski sees the desire of audiences to catch up with Western media in the post-socialist era as the central reason for the low resonance of the programme.⁵⁶ Some interviewees supported this observation and mentioned without further specification that the new series was no longer interesting. Although the end of the era of limited choice⁵⁷ is certainly a valid explanation, I would like to argue that there are other factors that need to be taken into consideration. First, the structural parameters of the *Karowski* family no longer reflect the average Polish surroundings,⁵⁸ especially the children's biographies, which evolved in very extreme ways. *Marek* raises three sons from different (failed) relationships on his own. One of his boys speaks only a mix of Polish and Russian. Being an anthropologist at Warsaw University, he also has to work as a security guard in order to cope financially while his sister *Jagoda* drives around in limousines. She is married to an extremely wealthy French businessman, pursuing a career of her own but without any offspring. Nevertheless *Magda's* and *Stefan's* employment issues certainly engage with a phenomenon faced by many Poles at the time. However, the visit of *Stefan's* Australian niece who is a professional and very successful wet-T-shirt model and of a mixed background certainly does not contribute to the impression of an average Polish family, something that was repeatedly referred to as a source of pleasure in relation to the original series, as argued above. The continuous dissolution or at least, the redefinition of the societal networks shaped by the realities of socialism certainly reflected part of the Polish reality in the early 1990s.⁵⁹ However the trend to fend for oneself instead of the community, the increasing shortage of time to spend with friends and the family may have put off people, thus leading to the rejection of the new series.

The former observations are implied in most comments made by the participants in the 2012 field-study – their position was mostly one of detachment vis-à-vis the new series. Most interviewees such as Albin (PM0951) could not specify why they were not interested in the new season. The most common response was that the participants did not watch the series at all or that "it was just not like the original anymore." The latter suggests that the viewers had expectations based upon their previous experiences with the *Karowski* family in the 1970s, which were not met by the new season. Here Natalia (PF0269) from Warsaw is representative of the majority of the interviewees. While she emphasised that the initial series was a realistic interpretation of everyday life and therefore liked by the

55 E.g. Gienia (PF1455) or Ryszard (PM0147)

56 Piotrowski, 2011, p. 173

57 A definition of this term can be found in Christina v. Hodenberg, 2012, p. 41.

58 The information given here is based upon a content analysis of the 2010 DVD collection and the summaries available at <http://www.film Polski.pl/fp/index.php/125727>, Accessed 20 May 2013

59 The rapid economic and political changes are outlined roughly in Norman Davies, *God's playground. A History of Poland, Volume II: 1975 to the Present*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 509-518

viewers, she could no longer find this pattern in the new episodes. Her mnemonic imagination could not bring her experiences and expectations in line with the mediated experience of the *Karwowski* family in the 1990s. That is particularly remarkable as she is one of the participants who stated that *Stefan* resembled a close family member of hers in terms of character and behaviour: her father. However she did not recognise him in the post-socialist version of *Stefan Karwowski* anymore. Contrary to these experiences, it was the personality structure of the protagonists that was explicitly perceived as constant by the only interviewee who did enjoy the season from the 1990s. Even though Ania (PF0475) from Słupsk only remembered one specific plot,⁶⁰ she clearly voiced that her affection for the main protagonists *Stefan* and *Magda* was not broken by the new circumstances. The contrast between the two perceptions and the general rejection of the new series highlights that the recognition of and attachment to our 'media friend' is renegotiated based upon the viewers' evolving personal biographies. It is also informed by previous experiences with 'media friends' that generate certain expectations about fictional peers. Most [comments in the online forum filmweb.pl](#) express criticism about the structural patterns mentioned above on various levels. In 2012, the forum user KaciorAlku criticised the stereotypical shame of having a coloured cousin which was expressed by "the old woman", while users 'matimat17' and 'ps man' both emphasized that the series could not be transferred into the new reality. The experiences with the 1993 series also led to sceptical comments about plans to resurrect *40-latek* once again in 2011.⁶¹

In this context it is interesting that actress Anna Seniuk (*Magda*) reflected that it was not a good idea to continue formerly successful stories, because this was unfair to the audience.⁶² Her evaluation implies an awareness of the challenge to meet the audience's expectations. As outlined above, the patterns of a major rejection of the post-socialist season are traceable in most press responses to the series as well as in online forum discussions of the programme. Meanwhile Jerzy Gruza's perception of the post-socialist season's reception differs slightly from the above-mentioned views.⁶³ Even though he recognizes the feminist critique of the new interpretation of *Magda Karwowska* by actress Anna Seniuk and the initial rejection of the new season, he also recalls receiving positive feedback about the actuality of the series after the 1993 season's rerun in the early 2000s. While this observation is not necessarily indicative of a major change in the audience's attitude towards the post-socialist version of *40-latek*, it still documents that the perspective of some viewers had changed in line with their experiences throughout the 10 years since the original broadcast. Gruza's conclusion that 1993 was simply too early to confront the audience with his new version of the *Karwowski*s must remain open for discussion. However, his testimony shows that the perceptions of mediated experiences are both determined by personal experiences and social factors.

Indeed the reception of the new version of one of the most famous Polish TV series from the 1970s proved to be a more complex issue than initially assumed by the director, the press and the audience. The expectations nourished by previous experiences with the *Karwowski* TV family were not fulfilled by the new season and its reception was overshadowed by the mainstream success of the original programme.

6 The Mnemonic Imagination Meets The Karwowski Family

Already experienced by viewers in the 1970s, *40-latek* has become part of Polish television history, a cultseries *par excellence*. The cult around the series is expressed in various forms ranging from lively discussions in internet forums, over 600 clips on You Tube - including more than 300,000 hits for the opening soundtrack⁶⁴ -, current references in popular science literature, numerous newspaper articles⁶⁵ and special anniversary television programmes often

60 The only plot Ania (PF0475) recalled was that the local population refused to use the bridge *Stefan* built with his new firm in episode 12.

61 Two examples for this attitude (30 letni wielbiciel PRL and tak mysle) were voiced in 2011 on http://www.se.pl/rozrywka/plotki/w-tvp-nie-chca-czterdziestolatka-popularny-serial-nie-doczeka-sie-kontynuacji_166627.html, Accessed 20 May 2013

62 Interview with Anna Seniuk, Teletydzien, *Przed Czterdziestolatkiem 20 lat później*, 26 June 1993.

63 Jerzy Gruza, *Ćlowiek z wieszakiem*. Życie zawodowe i Towarzystwie, Czytelnik, 2003, p. 120-122.

64 The numbers are based on a www.youtube.com search using the terms *Czterdziestolatek* and *40-latek* on the 14 December 2010. The theme tune has been accessed 321,086 times via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7od4JA2Y274&list=PL7DD7EACFB30B1E50&index=2>, Accessed 20 May 2013

65 e.g. Jerzy S. Majewski in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Serial Wielkich Inwestycji*, 27 July 2002, and <http://www.se.pl/czterdziestolatek.19968>, Accessed 20 May 2013

featuring interviews with Jerzy Gruza.⁶⁶

There are commercial aspects connected to remembering and nostalgic recollection. *40-latek* has been published in several DVD editions and also featured in a special CD edition that compiled the most famous Polish TV soundtracks.⁶⁷ In the 1990s, the series was even referenced in one of the first advertisements on television. A short clip promoting the detergent *Pollena 2000* from the early 1990s features *The Working Woman*, *Stefan* and *Karol*:

Video 3.

In the advertisement, *Stefan* complains about the stains on his shirt after washing it and states that life is quite poor without a wife. *Karol* and *The Working Woman* explain that he only needs a good detergent instead of a wife because that is what ‘working women’ use nowadays for their washing. The advert plays on the widely known appearance of *Irena Kwiatkowska* as a problem solver in the series and follows the exact structure of the programme, drawing on features that are familiar to the audience. It is particularly interesting because it follows the exact pattern of the narrative in the original series rather than only relying on the appearance of the actors. Its producers consciously play with a potential nostalgic identification of the viewers with the characters. The structural correlation becomes evident in a direct comparison between the advert and any appearance of *The Working Woman* at the *Karwowski* family’s home, such as, e.g. the sequence in which she advises *Magda* on marital issues (episode 12 *Nowy Zastępca, czyli Meteor*, 47:43-51:30).

Jerzy Gruza refers to another advertisement that references the characters *Stefan Karwowski* and *Maliniak* to promote “Connector” heaters.⁶⁸ He describes that this campaign dwelled on the persona of the characters, without mentioning any structural references to the narrative. Interestingly, the “Connector” advert did not linger in the memory of the audience, while *Pollena 2000* is still accessible on the Internet. It seems that copying the structural parameters of the series proved to be more effective than just using the characters.

Audience’s recollections outside the commercial arena of merchandising *40-latek* can be divided into two categories: considering the series as a historical document, and/or as a trigger for nostalgic recollections. Statements falling into the first category focus on goods, buildings, living and working conditions. They also refer to queuing and to the scarcity of goods and fashion in that era. Several people explicitly state that the series shows how life was at the time, considering thus the series a preserve of the past.⁶⁹ The agreement between the generations, had they lived in the *Gierek* era as young children or adults, underlines that people who were socialized during socialism have common perceptions of their past. Even though they were not necessarily generational peers of *Magda* and *Stefan*, both the older generation and their children share a common idea of normality in the socialist era. It would be interesting to see how people born after 1989 perceive the programme in contrast to the rather homogenous perception among those who experienced everyday-life in socialist Poland. The fact that the *Karwowski* family possessed all the goods an average Pole could dream of is not perceived critically by the commentators but in some cases awareness about this is mentioned in the interviews.⁷⁰ Among these comments, there is a mix between general statements regarding the depiction of life in the city and a more personal focus on certain elements. To give one representative example: *Albin* (PM0951) emphasises that the cars in the streets of Warsaw were a joke compared to what is available today. Furthermore, he remembered *Stefan Karwowski* standing in line for furniture – which is actually not a correct memory of a factual plot – however, he associated the image of *Stefan* queuing with a trip he made to Warsaw in order to buy furniture himself

Statements expressing nostalgic memories about the fictional interpretation of the PRL mostly appear alongside praise for the programme’s realism. The memory discourse on this level concentrates on values rather than material

66 The following interview round with *Jerzy Gruza* and *Andrzej Kopiczyński* was recorded on the 36th anniversary of the initial broadcast <http://www.tvp.pl/seriale/aktualnosci/czterdziestolatek-ma-36-lat/4519573/czterdziestolatek-ma-36-lat/4519575>. Accessed 20 May 2013

67 EMI Music Poland, ed, *Ale seriale! Złota Kolekcja*, 1999

68 *Gruza*, 1998, p. 270-271

69 The attribution of the series’ historical value becomes evident in a heated discussion between representatives of different generations on <http://www.filmweb.pl/serial/Czterdziestolatek-1974-35865/discussion/Najlepszy+serial+polski+wszech+czas%C3%B3w,.1072010>. Accessed 20 May 2013. Except for interviewee *Kasia* (PF0977) all participants perceived the reflection of everyday life in the PRL as realistic as in the original series.

70 This awareness about the slightly privileged position of the *Karwowski* family was most distinct in the conversation with *Albin* (PM0475) and *Leszek* (PM0560).

circumstances. Central features of social life during socialism that are considered long gone are the close relationship to the neighbours, honesty, family and spending time together. Almost all interviewees, regardless of their education and gender, regret a decrease in the series' spontaneity and sense of togetherness.⁷¹ This category of statements does not rely to a great extent on factual scenes from the series, rather it relates to a general emotion caused by remembering the audio-visual interpretation of the past.

On the basis of the sources available on nostalgic recollection and mnemonic imagination related to the broadcasting of the film in the 2000s, it can be said that the series is used as a vehicle for mnemonic imagination. While there are common patterns determined by the audience's collective experiences, remembering is also impacted by details from personal biographies. Nostalgic engagement with the series is not exclusively turned to the past. It rather implies a retrospective definition of the participants' common historical roots. All sources agree on one thing: the TV series is part of the Polish cultural heritage and it can be in one way or another regarded as a preserve of selected aspects of their past.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, one could say that *40-latek* has experienced three lives throughout Polish history. *Stefan Karwowski* was born as a modern and popular element of comic fiction on socialist TV in the Gierek era. He enjoyed a great deal of attention from his audience including a lasting affection, widespread identification and selective criticism. However, his reappearance in the tumultuous 1990s was overshadowed by foreign films and was rejected in the light of the fictionalized experiences that did not appeal to the post-socialist audience. Due to the continuity of *Karwowski's* presence both on screen and in various media, it is hard to define an exact point in Polish history that would mark the series' transition into the corpus of cultural heritage. However, it can be said with certainty that this paper has demonstrated the series' wide acceptance as a preserve of the past among Poles who perceive it as a realist interpretation of how they remember their everyday lives in socialism.

Biography

Kinga Bloch is a PhD candidate at the Centre for European Studies, University College London. Her research focuses on television series from the Cold War era in the FRG, GDR and Poland, with an emphasis on the ad-hoc and long-term relationship between audiences and the fictional interpretation of their everyday lives. In 2012 she has published a part of her research related to West German TV series in a special edition of *Opticon 1826*. Kinga has been teaching German history at Queen Mary University London and is due to complete her PhD in 2014.

⁷¹ Exemplary statements can be found in the field notes about Natalia (PF0269) and Maria (PF0355), as well as in the interviews with Magda (PF0542), Zbigniew (PM0371), Albin (PM0475) and Zosia (PF0875).