

# The Video Boom in Socialist Poland

by  
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The aim of this article is to discuss the course of dissemination of video as a consumer product and the growth of the popularity of video culture in the last years of state socialism in Poland.<sup>1</sup> Video was not only a popular media technology, but also a significant cultural phenomenon in the 1980s. The Video Cassette Recorder (VCR) as a material artefact and new movie genres generally linked with the dissemination of video, such as action cinema, horror and pornography, became symbols of the global dissemination of popular culture in the 1980s. In academic literature the dissemination of VCRs and new movie genres are discussed primarily for the case of the United States.<sup>2</sup> The course of the dissemination of video in Western Europe, in the Soviet bloc but also in other less developed regions has been barely recognised in scholarship.

In the Soviet bloc, with no existing regulations on electronic media copyrights, VCRs were used for watching pirate copies of American movies. Hollywood blockbusters and low-budget B-movies became a source of knowledge of America and thus played a role in the “imagining the West” in the region.<sup>3</sup> The best example of the role of video culture in shaping popular imagination in the former communist countries is a monument to Rocky Balboa erected in the Serbian village of Zitiste.<sup>4</sup> Rocky, a protagonist of one of the most popular movies of the video era (*Rocky*) and played by Sylvester Stallone, is a working class boxer who realises the American dream by hard work. Another monument to Bruce Lee, a popular actor of martial arts movies

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<sup>2</sup> JOSHUA M. GREENBERG: *From Betamax to Blockbuster. Video Stores and the Invention of Movies on Video*, Cambridge et al. 2008; MARK R. LEVY: *The VCR Age. Home Video and Mass Communication*, Thousand Oaks 1989; JULIA R. DOBROW (ed.): *Social & Cultural Aspects of VCRs Use*, Englewood 1990. There are also two websites dedicated to the history of video technology and both are rich in source material: <http://www.terramedia.co.uk/media/video/>; <http://www.totalrewind.org/> (1.04.2012).

<sup>3</sup> GYÖRGY PÉTERI (ed.): *Imagining the West in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, Pittsburgh 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Rocky gets statue in Serbia, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2007-08-20/rocky-gets-statue-in-serbia/644474> (1.04.2012).

such as *Enter the Dragon*, was erected in Mostar. His figure was carefully selected as a symbol of reconciliation between ethnic groups that fought in the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s “because watching his films was a truly shared and cherished experience for young Yugoslavs.”<sup>5</sup> Young Yugoslavs watched those movies primarily on pirated videocassettes, the country having one of the biggest pirate video markets in the region. In Poland there are no such monuments. However, watching pirated copies of *Rocky* and countless martial arts movies is currently recognised as one of the symbols of 1980s nostalgia in books as well as in the Internet.<sup>6</sup> In articles on popular culture artefacts in Poland found in the Internet, a videocassette is frequently pointed as one of the most recognisable cultural symbols of the decade.<sup>7</sup>

The key question here is what meanings were given to video by social actors who played role in the local dissemination of this media technology in a state socialist country? To understand the discourse surrounding this media technology in state socialist countries, cultural as well as economic factors should be taken into account. Here I include owners of VCRs, private importers and bazaar traders of VCRs and pirate movies as well as representatives of the Polish movie industry, state-owned television broadcasters, cultural critics and policy makers as relevant social actors. First I will reconstruct the dissemination of imported VCRs and movies within the framework of the informal economy and the cultural practices of VCR owners. Then I will reconstruct the discussion on video culture among Polish cultural critics as well as attempts of the Polish movie industry to create a national video industry.

Poland is ideal for such a study because, with easy access to consumer goods from Western Europe and a huge informal economic sector, it had the most developed pirate video market in Central Europe. The trajectory of the dissemination of video by black market entrepreneurs and the popularity of pirated American movies was relatively similar in the whole Soviet bloc in the 1980s. In contemporary Radio Free Europe reports and recent monographs on the history of media, video in Central Europe is discussed as one of the technologies that broke the state information monopoly.<sup>8</sup> The act of watching video movies was interpreted as a form of opposition against the policy of the communist authorities. However, enormous popularity of such

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Lee Statue, <http://memoryandjustice.org/site/bruce-lee-statue/> (1.04.2012).

<sup>6</sup> BARTEK KOZICZYŃSKI: 333 Popkultowe rzeczy ... PRL [333 Pop Culture Items ... PRL], Poznań 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Giełda elektroniczna – gadżetowy raj PRL-u [Electronic bazaars – paradise of gadgets in the Polish People’s Republic], <http://gadzetomania.pl/2011/01/30/gielda-elektroniczna-gadzetowy-raj-prl-u> (1.03.2012).

<sup>8</sup> FREDERICK STARR: New Communication Technologies and Civil Society, in: GRAHAM R. LOREN (ed.): Science and the Soviet Social Order, Cambridge – London 1990, pp. 19-50; SEYMOUR GOODMAN: Information Technologies and the Citizen: toward a “Soviet-Style Information Society”?, *ibidem*, pp. 51-70; STEPHEN KOVATS (ed.): Ost West Internet. Elektronische Medien im Transformationsprozess Ost- und Mitteleuropas, Frankfurt a.M. 1999.

videos, which resulted in the great demand for VCRs and video movies was more a result of the fascination with popular culture than a desire to watch movies with a specific political content. Moreover, contrary to popular opinion on the omnipotence of the communist authorities to impose regulations and social control, the case of video culture reveals a different picture of Poland in the 1980s, with decision makers unable or uninterested in imposing any regulations on the electronic media market.

Available literature on electronic media in socialist Poland is focused mainly on the role of mass media in the top-down dissemination of state propaganda.<sup>9</sup> Monographs on the period after 1989 concern the process of the “democratisation” of state media through privatisation.<sup>10</sup> There are as of yet no monographs that deal with the cultural and social practices of television audiences in state socialist Poland, for instance on the television as a symbol of social status, modernisation or progress. I can point out only one monograph on the social practices of Polish television audiences in the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> I was not able to find any in-depth academic study on the domestication, not only of video, but of any domestic electronic media in any of the Soviet bloc countries.

This article is primarily based on contemporary publications, press articles, official reports and personal memoirs. Such diverse sources help to understand activities of relevant social actors that influenced the discourse of video culture in state socialist Poland. As I argue, one of the most striking facts was the lack of any coherent state policy, and especially legislative action, towards electronic media. Thus I assume that it would be difficult to find any relevant documents in the state apparatus archives. Moreover, video black market was a tolerated grey area and there is no information on the prosecution of entrepreneurs trading pirated cassettes, so it would also be difficult to find substantial material in the archives of the law enforcement agencies.

## 1 Video Culture

Video, or, more specifically, the Video Home System (VHS) standard, became an enormous market success in the United States, in Western Europe and Japan in the early 1980s. Video was not merely a popular domestic electronics technology; it became a significant cultural phenomenon of that de-

<sup>9</sup> KATARZYNA POKORNA-IGNATOWICZ: *Telewizja w systemie politycznym i medialnym PRL. Między polityką a widzem* [Television in the Political and Media System of the People's Republic of Poland], Kraków 2006; PATRYK PLESKOT: *Wielki mały ekran. Telewizja a codzienność Polaków w latach sześćdziesiątych* [Little Big Screen. Television and Polish Everyday Life in the 1960s], Warszawa 2007.

<sup>10</sup> DAVID L. PALETZ, KAROL JAKUBOWICZ et al. (ed.): *Glasnost and After. Media and Change in Central and Eastern Europe*, New York 1995.

<sup>11</sup> MATEUSZ HALAWA: *Życie codzienne z telewizorem* [Everyday Life with the TV Set], Warszawa 2006.

cade.<sup>12</sup> It had significant impact on contemporary cinematography and television, resulting in “relations between television producers, texts and audiences [being] considerably reconfigured”.<sup>13</sup> This new medium was also widely discussed among cultural critics. On the one hand, it was perceived as a new opportunity of providing audiences with wider access to high culture, which was not a priority among commercial television broadcasters.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, video was perceived as a significant threat to the media system since it enabled the easy production of bootleg copies of commercially released videotapes. Moreover, due to the easiness of copying and distributing VHS cassettes and difficulties in the imposition of regulations and the control of the distribution of its contents, it was also perceived as a potential threat to public morality. This two-sided perception of video became a significant factor in the imposition of new censorship and copyright regulations in the United States and most Western European countries.<sup>15</sup>

To understand the social impact of the VCR, we need to include not merely meanings given by end-users but also the role of intermediaries, who also influenced significantly the social construction of this technology in the specific context of 1980s Poland. In their discussion of the domestication of media technologies, Roger Silverstone and Leslie Haddon pointed out that domestic media artefacts such as televisions and VCRs are “objects – embedded as they are in the public discourses of modern capitalism as well as the private discourses of home and household”.<sup>16</sup> The appropriation of domestic media in the context of capitalist societies was widely discussed by scholars of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.<sup>17</sup> Here I will discuss the

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<sup>12</sup> The impact of video on media culture in the 1980s is described in DOUGLAS KELLNER: *Media Culture. Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern*, London 1995. For the general discussion on communism and mass media, see COLIN SPARKS, ANNA READING: *Communism, Capitalism, and the Mass Media*, London et al. 1998.

<sup>13</sup> BERNADETTE CASEY, NEIL CASEY et al. (ed.): *Television Studies. The Key Concepts*, New York et al. 2008, p. 293.

<sup>14</sup> See MAX DAWSON: Home Video and the “TV Problem”. *Cultural Critics and Technological Change*, in: *Technology & Culture* 48 (2007), 3, pp. 524-549.

<sup>15</sup> These issues were analysed in-depth in numerous monographs, which, however, are focused only on the case of the United States: ELI M. NOAM: *Video Media Competition. Regulation, Economics, and Technology*, New York 1985; MARK R. LEVY, BARRIE GUNTER: *Home Video and the Changing Nature of the Television Audience*, New Barnet 1988.

<sup>16</sup> ROGER SILVERSTONE, LESLIE HADDON: Design and the Domestication of Information and Communication Technologies. Technical Change in Everyday Life, in: ROGER SILVERSTONE, ROBIN MANSELL (ed.): *Communication by Design*, London 1998, pp. 44-74, here p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> JOHN MORLEY: *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies*, London 1992; ROGER SILVERSTONE: *Television and Everyday Life*, London 1994.

appropriation of this media technology in the specific context of the socialist state with an enormous informal economy sector.<sup>18</sup>

Video as a cultural phenomenon appeared in Central Europe and the Soviet Union only a few years after the video boom on the other side of the Iron Curtain. The crucial factor in the dissemination of VCRs and videocassettes with movies was the informal economy. Since virtually all VCRs and most movies were brought from Western Europe and the Far East, video culture was unequivocally perceived by social actors as a “Western” phenomenon. This interpretation raised its popularity among audiences significantly. For owners of the expensive VCRs and those who watched video movies with their friends, this medium was perceived not merely as a platform for watching the Western world as portrayed in available movies. Practices of media consumption, similar to the use of the home computer, hi-fi audio equipment or satellite television, became a significant form of social distinction.

Video also became a significant topic in discussions among cultural critics, who argued that this technology could play a significant role in fostering the process of “the cultural education of society”, a slogan from communist ideological discourse. On the other hand, this technology, and especially black market video movies, was perceived as a risk to public morality as well as an economic threat for local movie industries.

Representatives of local movie and electronics industries were also quick to recognise the video market as a potential profitable business. Despite obvious differences in political systems and living standards on the two sides of the Iron Curtain, it is possible to find similarities between the activities and goals of electronics companies and movie industries in socialist and capitalist economies as well as state policy towards media. On the one hand, companies in the socialist economy that produced consumer goods were supposed to make a profit and not only to fulfil the five year plan. On the other hand, the influence of the state apparatus on the movie industry and censorship was also present in capitalist countries.<sup>19</sup>

## 2 “Western” VCRs and Polish Consumers

Video technology was used on a small-scale in Poland in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A small number of VCRs imported from the West were used by the broadcasting industry to record archival footage as well as in some state institutions for various professional tasks. In the 1970s, the Polish Unitra, a network of electronics manufacturers and the leading actor in the elec-

<sup>18</sup> For a description of the omnipresent informal economy in 1980s Poland, see JANINE R. WEDEL (ed.): *Unplanned Society. Poland during and after Communism*, New York 1992.

<sup>19</sup> ANNA MISIAK: *Kinematograf kontrolowany. Cenzura filmowa w kraju socjalistycznym i demokratycznym (PRL i USA). Analiza socjologiczna [Controlled Cinematography. Cinematic Censorship in a Socialist and a Democratic Country: The Polish People's Republic and the USA. A Sociological Analysis]*, Kraków 2006.

tronics industry, developed a Polish VCR: the MTV-10.<sup>20</sup> In that decade, video technology was introduced for a new purpose by Maciej Szczepański, the director of the Polish state-owned television broadcaster (Telewizja Polska) and co-author of the “propaganda of success” with Edward Gierek, 1970-1980 First Secretary of the Polish United Workers’ Party.<sup>21</sup> Szczepański introduced video not only to the processes of production and storage of aired content. One former employee of Telewizja Polska describes his pioneering role in promoting video culture among high ranking Party officials as follows:

“Szczepański [...] provided Central Committee members, the families of government ministers and chiefs of the voivodeship Party committees with VCRs. These VCRs were purchased with dollars as the equipment for Telewizja Polska and were leased. These numbered a few hundred of VCRs [...] All movie novelties were available on the cassettes for Party secretaries. Telewizja imported cassettes with those movies for a week to make a decision on potential purchases and then the movies were copied illegally. A special unit was established merely to release Polish versions of these movies. Special bundles of movies for Party secretaries were distributed weekly with cars. In such bundles there was one movie stopped by the censor, for instance *The Deer Hunter*<sup>22</sup>, one American box office movie too expensive to purchase, one romantic movie for the housewife, one softcore porno for the head of the family and one children’s movie [...] A scandal broke out when television employees made a mistake. The children of one of the VIPs put their cassette into VCR and instead of a cartoon it was porn.”<sup>23</sup>

This narrative reveals the practice of watching video movies as one of the features and privileges of the Party elite lifestyle of the 1970s, which was clearly more interested in Western than Soviet cinematography. It is worth emphasising the enormous cost of such an enterprise: the cost of importing VCRs, videocassettes, transport as well as the salaries of employees engaged in acquiring such tapes. I assume that this system of distribution was kept secret and played no role in the wide dissemination of video culture among wider and less privileged audiences.

In this case VCRs were used exclusively for watching prerecorded content, not for recording programmes aired on television and time-shifting. A decade later they were used by mass audiences in a similar way. Watching of Hollywood movies was definitely a more attractive alternative than the content of the two state television channels. This use of media technology was different

<sup>20</sup> The MTV-10 was produced by Unitra from 1973 to 1978; it was a reverse engineered copy of the Philips LDL-1001. The history of Unitra and its member companies can be found on the website: [www.unitra.eu.org](http://www.unitra.eu.org) (15.11.2011).

<sup>21</sup> For a long interview with Szczepański, see TERESA TORAŃSKA: *Byli* [They Were], Warszawa 2006, pp. 151-195.

<sup>22</sup> This well known movie by Michael Cimino on the Vietnam War was not released in Soviet bloc cinemas due to graphic sequences of North Vietnamese Army cruelty.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Stefan Szlachtycz, in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 4.04.2010, [http://wyborcza.pl/1,75480,7717056,Bufety\\_na\\_Woronicza.html](http://wyborcza.pl/1,75480,7717056,Bufety_na_Woronicza.html) (10.11.2011). Since I could not find information about such practices elsewhere, it is difficult to verify this story.

from the situation in the United States, where in the late 1970s and early 1980s VCRs were used primarily for recording movies and sports events broadcast by commercial television stations.<sup>24</sup>

In discussing the course of the introduction of VCRs in Poland it is necessary to briefly present the political and social landscape of socialist Poland in the 1980s. The martial law imposed for 18 months on 13 December 1981 prevented Poles from travelling abroad almost completely. After the lifting of martial law travel was again possible, even if the repressive policy towards the political opposition continued. Polish citizens were able to travel across the Iron Curtain far more easily than citizens of the GDR. Such opportunities were widely used by Poles who emigrated to the United States, the United Kingdom or West Germany. This mass emigration in the 1980s was less a result of political harassment than a response to the deepening economic crisis in Poland.<sup>25</sup> Temporary labour migration was a profitable source of income, among other things due to the extremely high exchange rate for dollars and West German marks in Poland. Some Poles, known as “trade-tourists”, used the opportunity when abroad to acquire various commodities with the aim to sell them on the domestic black market.<sup>26</sup> Western consumer goods were also imported for personal use since possession and consumption of Western goods was perceived as a social status symbol. Imported consumer electronics were a highly regarded and much desired commodity for two reasons. On the one hand, one relatively small item could bring enormous profit when sold on the domestic black market. It was even profitable to travel not only to West Germany but to Taiwan or Singapore to import consumer electronics. Such trade-tourists would import one or more items such as VCRs or home computers and filled the rest of their available baggage space with other smaller electronic items.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, owning a Western VCR, TV set, hi-fi equipment or home computer was a way to show the social status linked with being able to travel to the West, trade skills and income in hard currency.<sup>28</sup> Such items

<sup>24</sup> GREENBERG (as in footnote 2), pp. 17-40.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion on Polish emigration see DARIUSZ STOLA: *Kraj bez wyjścia? Migracje z Polski 1949-1989* [A Country without an Exit? Migration from Poland 1949-1989], Warszawa 2010; IDEM: *Das kommunistische Polen als Auswanderungsland*, in: *Zeit-historische Forschungen* 2 (2005), pp. 345-365.

<sup>26</sup> For the history of trade tourism in state socialism see the contributions in issue 2 of the *Journal of Modern European History* 8 (2010). The *Polenmarkt* in West Berlin and the *Schmugglerzug* Warsaw-Berlin became prominent symbols of this phenomenon.

<sup>27</sup> Beside VCRs, Polish trade-tourists flying with Aeroflot Airlines to South-East Asia bought cheap pocket calculators and watches, both commodities that were in high demand in Poland.

<sup>28</sup> For the description of new private businessmen and their economic and cultural practices, see PIOTR GLIŃSKI: *Acapulco near Konstancin*, in: WEDEL (as in footnote 18), pp. 144-152. See also JACEK ROSTOWSKI: *The Decay of Socialism and the Growth of Private Enterprise in Poland*, in: *Soviet Studies* 41 (1989), 2, pp. 194-214.

were displayed prominently in a flat. A VCR could also be included in social rituals such as Sunday dinner with friends and neighbours, when the proud owner of a VCR screened a popular movie. Possession of a VCR gave access to a completely new form of entertainment – pirated Western movies, primarily Hollywood blockbusters of the 1980s, pornographic movies, martial arts movies and Italian imitations of American action movies.

Socialist Poland had two state-run television channels that showed mostly Polish movies, entertainment programmes and state propaganda. In the 1970s Szczepański began showing Western movies more frequently as a method for making state television more appealing. Since the 1970s, such movies, primarily westerns, crime dramas and World War Two war movies were shown during primetime as highlights. Poles could also watch two high profile American crime television series: *Columbo* and *Kojak*. But they could not understand Sony's popular advertisement slogan, which promoted its VCR saying: "Now you don't have to miss *Kojak* because you're watching *Columbo* (or vice versa)!" since these series were never aired simultaneously by Polish television.<sup>29</sup> Instead of expanding the television watching experience, videocassettes offered Poles unrestricted access to a new form of entertainment, an enormous selection of movies that were never screened on Polish television. Television audiences could watch selected American movies as highlights on Saturday evenings, but with a VCR, local video stores and bazaars with a large selection of pirated movies, one had access to a few hundred movies of diverse genres that could be watched anytime.

To understand the mass popularity of video we need to include the fact that video was mentally constructed by Polish users as a strictly Western technology. Thus it was attributed the same positive values as other attractive Western cultural trends and commodities, for instance denim clothing.<sup>30</sup> This feature of the attribution of video in the Soviet bloc was emphasised in a contemporary Radio Free Europe report:

"In the public's mind the video phenomenon is firmly associated with Western technical ingenuity and a Western quality of life. Western equipment is rated far above any locally manufactured equipment, and tapes with Western-made programs (mostly films) are overwhelmingly preferred to domestic ones."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> GREENBERG (as in footnote 2), p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> See ANNA PELKA: *Teksas-land. Moda młodzieżowa w PRL* [Texas Land: Youth Fashion in the People's Republic of Poland], Warszawa 2007.

<sup>31</sup> The Video Revolution in Eastern Europe, Radio Free Europe Background Report/242, 17.12.1987, Herder-Institut Marburg, sign. P743/VIII, p. 4. The case of video culture clearly shows that "Western technology" was a cultural construct. The VHS system was developed by the Japanese company JVC. Moreover, primarily Japanese brands of VCRs were popular around the world. However, in the logic of a citizen of a socialist country, the Far East located beyond the Iron Curtain, belonged to "the West". For the history of the domination of Japanese companies on the consumer electronic market,



The social role of VCRs in Poland and their role as a symbol of social status were greatly influenced by their price. For instance, in West Germany a VCR cost a few hundred marks, just a fraction of an average monthly salary. In Poland the same VCR cost up to ten monthly salaries. In the early 1980s, when VCRs were hardly affordable and rarely available, video was called the entertainment for “greengrocers” (*badylarz*), a pejorative term for a wealthy private entrepreneur. However, with a steady increase in numbers of VCRs from abroad in the second half of the 1980s, the prices dropped and they became more affordable.

According to the estimates of cultural critics and representatives of the movie industry, in the second half of the 1980s there existed in Poland a few hundred thousand VCRs. I have found only one statistic on the dissemination of VCRs in the late 1980s and this shows that in 1987 VCRs could be found in about 5% of households.<sup>32</sup> The article also provides detailed information on the availability and pricing of specific VCR brands and videocassettes. Statistics from the early 1990s show a relatively high percentage of VCRs per household as well as a rapid increase in these numbers (Fig. 1). An additional distinction between workers and peasants is made, an ideological differentiation that also provides a little in-depth information.

	1990	1991	1992
Workers	201	410	534
Worker-Peasants	69	191	277
Peasants	47	108	155

Fig. 1: The percentage of households with VCRs per 1000<sup>33</sup>

The rapid increase in the number of VCRs in Polish households was stimulated by further increases in supply and decreases in price in the free market economy of the early 1990s. VCRs now cost only a part of a monthly salary, not a few salaries, as only a few years before. Thus, from a symbol of social status during the 1980s the VCR evolved into an everyday domestic commodity.

see ALFRED D. CHANDLER: *Inventing the Electronic Century. The Epic Story of the Consumer Electronics and Computer Industries*, Cambridge et al. 2005.

<sup>32</sup> PIOTR GAWEL: *Pierwsza Runda dla Rocky’ego* [The First Round for Rocky], in: *Polityka*, 12.03.1988.

<sup>33</sup> *Kultura w 1993 r.* [Culture in 1993], Warszawa 1994, p. 17. Detailed data on watching video movies in 1993 are available on pp. 186-187.

### 3 Video Black Market

In the mid-1980s VCRs were available in Poland only on bazaars or in private commissioner shops, where commodities imported by small-scale entrepreneurs and occasional traders were sold.<sup>34</sup> In Warsaw the most popular place for buying such imported goods was the Persian Market (Jarmark Perski), which had evolved from a local flea market to a well-known centre of the informal economy. Every weekend thousands of sellers offered all kinds of consumer goods unavailable in state-owned stores and tens of thousands of potential buyers strolled across the market, often just to browse. Entrepreneurs selling consumer electronics placed their stands in rows, the tables full of tape recorders, hi-fi equipment, TV sets and VCRs as well as pirated audio and videocassettes. Mostly Western hardware imported by trade-tourists were sold in the bazaars together with a few products, such as TV sets and cameras imported from other Soviet bloc countries. However, those items were perceived as far inferior to goods imported from the West.

The private import of VCRs resulted in increased numbers of video stores that offered a wide selection of pirated movies for sale and rental. There were two forms of video stores. One was a simple stand at the bazaar, where a trader offered wide selection of movies stored in cardboard boxes for sale, scarcely for rent. Videocassette traders also accepted videos in exchange if the client offered them interesting and highly desired title. Since there was no TV set immediately available set to check the quality of the offered movie, this practice reveals a high level of trust between traders and clients in the informal economy. In numerous reportages, state media journalists emphasised the negative aspects of the video black market: the enormous profits made in black market economic activities and the primitivity of the available movie selection, especially action and pornographic movies. However, such reportages provide us with some knowledge of basic practice among bazaar movie traders, potential profits and the titles of movies popular among audiences. Here is a typical description of electronics bazaar in Wrocław:

“Sunday, 9 AM. About 30 persons with cardboard boxes full of videocassettes are walking slowly. ‘I sell, buy or exchange’ – this is the motto of the market. ‘Would you like to exchange *Katarina – The Naked Czarina* for Weekend? You don’t want to exchange softcore for hardcore porn? So maybe you would like to choose one of adult fairy tales?’ Just a short conversation and the transaction is done. Traders are looking for someone willing to exchange movies. The most wanted are: *Police Academy 3*, *Invasion USA*, *Rocky IV* and so forth. *Cobra* is a hit [...] The cassettes with this brawler [Sylvester Stallone] are sold for 8000 zloty [the average monthly salary in 1987 is about 25,000 zloty] and these are hotcakes. The prices for horror, porn and karate movies have dropped recently. However, one

<sup>34</sup> The video black market was not a unique form of distribution specific to less developed countries. Some video stores in the United States offered bootleg movies as well, see GREENBERG (as in footnote 2).

has to pay handsomely for the cassettes with the concerts of popular teenage music stars.”<sup>35</sup>

The mentioned movies are highly popular slapstick comedies (*Police Academy*) and violent action movies (*Invasion USA*, *Cobra*). Aside from such bazaar traders, video movies were also rented by numerous private video stores opened in large and medium sized cities. They were run legally as private service shops on the same legal basis as tailors and cobblers. Such stores rented pirated copies of movies almost exclusively.<sup>36</sup> Entrepreneurs who rented pirated movies were simply tolerated by the authorities and not harassed by police since in state socialist Poland no copyright protection existed for electronic media.<sup>37</sup> Contrary to the United States, where video store employees were frequently movie aficionados themselves (e.g. the famous film director Quentin Tarantino), in Poland, video stores were run most often by small-scale entrepreneurs, who perceived this activity merely as a profitable business but not as a passion.<sup>38</sup> Since these people were linked with video culture only marginally, it is very difficult to find any personal testimonies of video store and bazaar movie traders.

Interesting in-sights into the pirate videocassette market in Poland are provided by video guides – extensive catalogues of domestically available movies. Such guides provided a VCR owner with information on which movie he should rent or buy. Available movies were listed with basic information about the director and cast, a brief movie review and one to five star rating. According to the first catalogue of this kind, published in 1989, at least 2 315 movie titles were available in Poland. It is worth noting the cover of this volume as a special insight into the visual iconography of late 1980s video culture.<sup>39</sup> It was a collage of pictures of Sylvester Stallone as Rambo, a truck from *The Convoy*, an action movie about American truck drivers, Mickey Mouse, an American military helicopter and the comedians Laurel and Hardy.

Video movies that circulated on bazaars and in video stores had somehow to be imported from abroad. Those movies were probably simply copied from the cassettes available in video stores in Western Europe, mostly in West Germany – the main source of imported consumer goods in Poland, or possibly

<sup>35</sup> Wideo nie zna granic [Video Has No Limits], in: *Ślowo Polskie*, 30.03.1987. In the follow I will use the original English or German movie titles.

<sup>36</sup> There were some exceptions. A few video stores offered licensed copies. Such economic activity was highly praised by cultural critics and journalists. An interview with the founder of probably the first legal video store Warsaw Video was published in: *Prawo i Życie*, 17.11.1984.

<sup>37</sup> The copyright protection act (Ustawa o prawie autorskim i prawach pokrewnych), which included electronic media, such as video, music and computer software was introduced on 4 February 1994 after a long debate in Polish parliament. See: *Dziennik Ustaw* (1994), 24, position 83, <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl> (20.11.2011).

<sup>38</sup> GREENBERG (as in footnote 2).

<sup>39</sup> *The Best of Video*, Warszawa 1989.

they were bought from local video black marketeers. Numerous hints suggest that most video movies were imported from West Germany. For instance, titles of some movies circulated in Poland were literal translations of the German titles.<sup>40</sup>

Movie copies distributed in Poland were provided with a Polish voiceover. This system of translation is a Polish oddity first introduced in Polish state television. In cinemas, foreign movies were provided with Polish subtitles. In foreign movies aired on television, a male speaker simply reads a translation of all dialogues over the original voices. In the case of pirated movies imported from West Germany, German dubbing could be heard in the background instead of the voices of the original actors. Popular opinion in Poland has it that the voiceover technique is more comfortable than subtitles since there is no need to read. The pirates simply aimed to provide Polish audiences with the product which would resemble the comfortable television translation system. Later, in the 1990s, this system would be also adopted by most legal video distributors. The recording of a Polish voiceover theoretically required at least a semi-professional studio as well as a skilled speaker. Sometimes the voiceover soundtrack was recorded professionally and skilled television speakers were hired to do this. In most cases, however, the quality of the Polish voiceover was rather poor. Memories of movies with poorly made translations as well as obviously amateur speakers with bad enunciation made by companies with names such as Art Video Service is a part of contemporary nostalgia for the Polish video culture of the 1980s.<sup>41</sup> The well-known Polish journalist and translator Tomasz Beksiński remembered his interest in *James Bond* movies and the bad translations that finally led to him recording his own version:

“To watch James Bond movies I bought a VCR and a colour television. For a long time I was not able to get any Bond with an original soundtrack – and pirated translations were disastrous! I wanted to collect original versions; for me it was the greatest fun. However, when I wanted to screen my Bonds for somebody, I had to sit and do a live translation. I also had to prepare sandwiches and wine; visitors were eating and drinking and I was translating. One day I said: ‘Fuck! I also want to drink some wine, eat sandwiches and watch the movie, instead of sitting and translating. I am going to record my own soundtrack to be relieved of this duty’.”<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> One of the biggest hits on the Polish video market was the Italian movie *Vendetta dal futuro* (1986) widely known under the English title *Hands of Steel*. It was an Italian low-budget imitation of the science fiction movies *Terminator* and *Blade Runner*. This movie in Germany was titled *Paco – Kampfmaschine des Todes*. The Polish title *Paco – Maszyna Śmierci* was a literal translation of the German title. However, this movie was also known under another title, a literary translation of the English title.

<sup>41</sup> See: Gdzie są tłumaczenia z tamtych lat [Where have those translations gone?], [http://www.film.org.pl/prace/tlumaczenia\\_z\\_tamtych\\_lat.html](http://www.film.org.pl/prace/tlumaczenia_z_tamtych_lat.html) (10.11.2011).

<sup>42</sup> Cited in KOZICZYŃSKI (as in footnote 5), p. 56.

Some movies which circulated on the black market leaked from the official system of movie distribution. I can cite the case of the *The Tin Drum* (*Die Blechtrommel*), which was screened in Polish cinemas with a few scenes removed by the censors. In one of the reportages on the video black market journalist quoted a scene from a video store. A clerk in the video store recommends *The Tin Drum* as a current hit. However, he adds: "Please, don't be disturbed, when you see the blank screen for about two minutes. The censors removed one scene."<sup>43</sup> The copy available in the video store was probably copied from the source cassette by one of the employees of Cinema Distribution Enterprise (Przedsiębiorstwo Dystrybucji Filmów), a state-owned company that distributed movies for cinemas.<sup>44</sup>

Solidarność activists also ran their own video store where a selection of about fifty movies known as "anti-state" was available. For instance, this video store offered *The Deer Hunter*, *Doctor Zhivago* and *James Bond* movies (the latter also widely distributed on the black market). Documentaries about the Polish pope recorded from Western television and Polish movies that were never officially released such as: *Man of Marble* (*Człowiek z Marmuru*), *Man of Iron* (*Człowiek z żelaza*), *Interrogation* (*Przesłuchanie*) were also available.<sup>45</sup> This video store was cited by Radio Free Europe as a sign of the widespread appropriation of new media technologies by Polish dissidents.<sup>46</sup> However, such clandestine circulation of video movies among dissidents was rather limited when compared to the mass phenomenon of commercial video stores with a completely different movie selection.

The mass pirated video market existed until the first half of the 1990s. Shortly after the regime change in 1989, several private entrepreneurs became official distributors for Western movie companies. Legal retailers of cassettes began a campaign advertising legal video movies. This campaign emphasised the advantages of legal copies such as high picture and sound quality as well as professional Polish translation. Those companies also lobbied to convince audiences that practices of watching and copying pirated movies were unethical and illegal.<sup>47</sup> In the period of the early 1990s the consolidation of video

<sup>43</sup> Probably it is the scene of the group rape by Red Army troops. TERESA UMER: Wideo pod piracką banderą [Video under the Pirate Banner], in: Tygodnik Polski, 12.04.1987, p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> For the historical background on the Polish movie distribution system, see: TADEUSZ KOWALSKI (ed.): Kinematografia. W kierunku rynku i Europy, 2009, [http://www.kongreskultury.pl/library/File/RoSK\\_kinematografia/kinematografia\\_kowalski.pdf](http://www.kongreskultury.pl/library/File/RoSK_kinematografia/kinematografia_kowalski.pdf) (10.11.2011); see also ALEKSANDER WALLIS: Atlas kultury Polski 1946-1980, Międzychód 1994, pp. 281-318.

<sup>45</sup> Video, in: Kultura Niezależna (1985), 11-12, pp. 125-127.

<sup>46</sup> The Video Revolution in Eastern Europe (as in footnote 31), pp. 27-29. The appropriation of new media technologies by Solidarność is discussed by Carmen V. Krol in her forthcoming PhD thesis, Cornell University.

<sup>47</sup> Such campaigns for disciplining VCR owners on the behalf of Western media companies could be compared with practices conducted of Western managers who tried to im-

store market began. Small independent video stores initially offered a wide selection of legal and pirated Hollywood blockbusters, some even before their official premiere in Polish cinemas, as well as hardcore pornography and niche movie genres. These were soon replaced by video stores that belonged to larger networks such as Beverly Hills, Videoworld and Video-Max.<sup>48</sup> Stores under the control of those networks offered a much smaller selection of movies, primarily Hollywood blockbusters, without any controversial or niche genres that were previously widely available on semi-legal market.

In the 1980s and 1990s pirated video movies were also popular among cinema aficionados. VCRs became popular among students of the humanities interested in world cinema organised in numerous Cinema Discussion Clubs (Dyskusyjny Klub Filmowy). Students were particularly interested in famous and scandalous movies such as *A Clockwork Orange*, *Caligula* or *Salò or the 120 Days of Sodom* (*Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*), which were unavailable in any other form in socialist and even post-socialist Poland. As a high-school student in the mid-1990s I was personally involved in such a club at the Maria Skłodowska Curie University in Lublin. According to the testimony of one of the founders of this club, who had a personal collection of a few thousand pirated VHS cassettes, screenings of such movies were very popular in the 1980s among students who lived and studied in Lublin since it was one of a few entertainment opportunities in this city. Even in the mid-1990s this club was very popular and the club room was always full when classics or scandalous movies were screened. The greatest hit of the era was *The Last Temptation of Christ* with live translation, a film that was never officially screened in Polish cinemas and only released on DVD in the 2000s due to its purportedly anti-Catholic content. Video was also appropriated by science fiction aficionados, who circulated classic and contemporary science fiction movies. For instance, in 1988 a science fiction fan club in Gdańsk held a festival of cinematic adaptations of Stephen King's novels, where pirated copies were screened.<sup>49</sup>

#### 4 Video and cultural critics

In popular discourse today, video is unequivocally linked with the popularisation of pornography, gruesome horror movies and violent action cinema in the 1980s.<sup>50</sup> However, originally, video technology was much welcomed

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pose norms of capitalist labour in Polish companies, see ELIZABETH C. DUNN: *Privatizing Poland. Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labour*, Ithaca et al. 2004.

<sup>48</sup> Similar consolidation processes that led to the removal of some movie genres from mass circulation are described in GREENBERG (as in footnote 2), p. 116.

<sup>49</sup> Świat według Kinga [The world according to King], in: *Fantastyka* (1989), November, pp. 53-60.

<sup>50</sup> For the original discussion of such genres and video, see MARTIN BARKER: *The Video Nasties. Freedom and Censorship in the Media*, London 1984. Cf. CHAS CRITCHER: *Moral Panics and the Media*, Maidenhead 2003.

by cultural critics, who perceived it as a technology that could have a positive impact on the wider dissemination of high culture. Max Dawson reconstructs the discussion on the role of video in American media in the 1960s and 1970s. He argues that originally, video was welcomed by the movie industry and cultural critics as a means to save American audiences from “the television wasteland” with its quiz shows and soap operas.<sup>51</sup>

Reading most academic volumes on the electronic media landscape in the Soviet bloc, one could get the impression that video, which reconfigured substantially the relationship between producer, broadcaster and viewer, was simply rejected by the communist authorities afraid of losing their information monopoly.<sup>52</sup> I challenge this approach since it is based on the false belief that communist authorities actively opposed the dissemination of any new information and communication technologies. Recent works on the role of technology in the Soviet bloc show instead that media and information technologies were both welcomed and well-suited to the ideological discourse.<sup>53</sup> To paraphrase Paul Josephson’s book title, Trotsky would not only have worn a Bluetooth, he would also have gladly watched a rented copy of *Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronenosets Potemkin*) on his VCR.

Reading contemporary sources shows clearly that, first of all, there was no coherent state policy in Poland towards video. I could not find any official statement on the issue, which suggests that simply no one was interested in this matter. I can only quote a speech by Jerzy Majka – editor-in-chief of *Trybuna Ludu*, the Polish United Worker’s Party press organ, during the X. Convention of the party in 1986 in which he states his positive opinion of the new technologies, despite the typically aggressive language and his obvious lack of knowledge on the matter: “We need to stand and fight the enemy in the field of information technologies. We need to do this in the field of the production of videophones and videocassettes as well as the development of our programmes for video games and the organisation of activities of video and computer clubs.”<sup>54</sup> His references to “videophones”, that is, VCRs, and the awkward term “programmes for video games” (the literal translation from Polish “programy dla gier video”) clearly shows his ignorance of media technologies.

The only significant decision on video taken by central authorities concerned the investment in the development of Polish VCRs and a system of video movie distribution. This investment was influenced by the cultural critics and representatives of the movie industry. Such actors presented their arguments in discussions with numerous bureaucratic advisory bodies as well

<sup>51</sup> DAWSON (as in footnote 14), pp. 524-529.

<sup>52</sup> STARR (as in footnote 8); PALETZ/JAKUBOWICZ (as in footnote 10).

<sup>53</sup> RAYMOND G. STOKES: *Constructing Socialism. Technology and Change in East Germany 1945-1990*, Baltimore et al. 2000; PAUL JOSEPHSON: *Would Trotsky wear a Bluetooth? Technological Utopianism under Socialism 1917-1989*, Baltimore 2009.

<sup>54</sup> Bajtek (1986), July, p. 2.

as in numerous articles in leading magazines (*Polityka*, *Kultura*) and the press (*Trybuna Ludu*, *Życie Warszawy*).

The discussion about video in Poland began in the early 1980s. Initially this medium was described as a novelty only available to the wealthy in the West. The question of what will happen when video would become available in Poland was nevertheless raised. In one of the first articles on video published in the 1980s, the author estimates that at the time in Poland only a few thousand VCRs are owned by institutions and used exclusively for professional purposes. He assumes that video technology would spread and find use for cultural and entertainment purposes. He also points out the lack of any activity by state institutions, which should appropriate video as a medium for recording and making available “ambitious movies and theatre pieces”.<sup>55</sup> Those two features, the idea that video should play a role in the dissemination of high culture and complaints on the lack of any state policies, were two focal points in most of arguments in the discussion on the role of video. The potential of video in cultural education and the potential risks when used without any coherent educational programme were also constants in such discussions.<sup>56</sup>

In the discussion on video in the United States, this technology was primarily perceived as an alternative to television, the broadcasters being criticised for their focus on low culture, the programming being referred as a “vast wasteland”.<sup>57</sup> In socialist Poland with a state-owned broadcaster, the crucial element of the propaganda system could not be criticised so openly. Moreover, video was presented by cultural critics not as an alternative but as an addition to the media system and thus state-controlled as well.

Video made a significant appearance in Polish mass media about 1984–1986. In that period the potentially ambitious role of video was compared with the actual pirate video market, which cultural critics discussed as a two-fold problem. Black market entrepreneurs had no respect for copyrights, and moreover, the pirate video market was the source of mostly worthless popular culture movies. Here is a typical critique on the pirate movie market:

“Movies that became worldwide artistic events are scarce, there are few cinema classics. There are virtually no popular science movies. The most popular are movies with Bruce Lee and his imitators [...] The second most popular genre is the western, for instance *Winnetou* and *The Magnificent Seven*. The next genre is ‘historical-legendary’ cinema [kino historyczno-legendarne], movies such as *Ben-*

<sup>55</sup> ANDRZEJ W. WRÓBLEWSKI: Wideo kasety, videopłyty ... kiedy? [Videocassettes, Videodiscs ... When?], in: *Kultura*, 29.06.1980.

<sup>56</sup> Articles from the Soviet press reveal a similar rhetoric; see: Video in der Sowjetunion – Möglichkeiten und Probleme, *Osteuropa* 35 (1985), pp. A606–A611.

<sup>57</sup> See for instance Newton N. Minow’s famous “Wasteland Speech” from 1961, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/newtonminow.htm> (3.04.2012).



*Hur* and *Spartacus*. The next are police and war movies, action cinema, science fiction, comedies (primarily those with Louis de Funès).<sup>58</sup>

A short review of movie titles available in Poland shows that the pirate video market was even more worthless from cultural critics' point of view. According to *The Best of Video*, in addition to *The Magnificent Seven*, numerous spaghetti westerns were available. As for "historical-legendary movies", audiences could watch, beside *Ben-Hur*, *Conan the Barbarian* and countless other sword and sorcery movies. The comedies of Louis de Funès were joined by the *Police Academy* and the Israeli *Eskimo Limon* series.

Cultural critics primarily saw the blame not with the movie pirates, who offered only B-movies for profit, but with the authorities, who had neither regulated the video market nor took any positive steps to establish a system of distribution of quality films. Most authors complained about the pirate market as full of junk and juxtaposed it to a model of a highly regulated market with legal and valuable movies. The writer and screenwriter Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz, one of the most prominent Polish cultural critics of the time, who wrote regularly for *Polityka* and was editor-in-chief of the well-known *Szpilki*, wrote: "The video medium is completely neglected by official decision makers [czynnik oficjalny]."<sup>59</sup>

As opposed to the harsh critiques of the video market published primarily in *Trybuna Ludu*, journalists from other magazines described video movies merely as valueless cultural texts, not as an ideological threat. For instance, the video threat was laughed at and compared to the threat posed by Coca-Cola:

"Maybe some readers will be outraged that I am not screaming 'Away with video!' and not calling to imprison owners of *Josephine* [a softcore pornographic movie loosely based on the Josephine Mutzenbacher novel], *Caligula* and *Rambo*. I will say it once again – there are about half of a million of them, but so what? Nothing. It seems that everything linked to video is as dangerous as Coca Cola was earlier."<sup>60</sup>

Some journalists went even further. *Ekran*, a popular weekly television guide that also published lifestyle content became a supporter of video. In 1986 *Ekran* started publishing a ranking of the top-ten most popular video movies based on information from video stores that sold pirated cassettes. Another popular magazine, *Pan*, established in 1987 and modelled after *Playboy* regularly published video movie reviews. Short sections with video movie reviews appeared in numerous other magazines as attractive content aimed to increase sales.

<sup>58</sup> TERESA UMER: Opanować Wideo-Żywiół [Stopping the Video Element], in: Tygodnik Polski, 30.11.1986.

<sup>59</sup> KRZYSZTOF TEODOR TOEPLITZ: My i nasz telesystem [We and our Telesystem], in: Polityka, 20.06.1987.

<sup>60</sup> PIOTR CEGŁOWSKI: Groźne jak Coca-Cola [As Dangerous as Coca-Cola], in: Polityka, 29.11.1986.

Video was discussed in numerous articles and books on the cultural participation of youth. The 1980s were marked by the development of youth subcultures, a rapid increase in drug abuse and youth violence. Video movies and computer games were condemned as factors in the growth of such youth pathologies, not only in the United States and Western Europe but also in communist Poland. Journalists frequently quoted material, some of them probably urban legend, on the impact of video violence on youth violence in Western countries. Video movies were also discussed as an easy form of access to pornography for children and adolescents. Aside from frequent press articles, this moral panic was reflected in *W labiryncie* (In the Labyrinth), the first Polish soap opera – a television highlight of the era. In one episode a teenage punk gives a German softcore pornographic movie to a teenage girl. During the screening of this movie he tries to seduce her, but she is saved by the sudden appearance of her father, who confiscates the cassette with the inappropriate content.<sup>61</sup>

On the other hand, video was discussed as a potential tool in the cultural education of the youth, a buzzword in 1980s socialist Poland. Janusz Gajda, a professor of pedagogy and author of works on the theory of culture, describes video as a valuable extension of the current state-owned media system.<sup>62</sup> He suggests that videocassettes be used to disseminate high culture television broadcasting. Moreover, he argues video plays a positive role in Polish society. “Television video recordings are used for entertainment by patients in hospitals or by ship’s crews.”<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately, he does not mention what kind of recordings ship crews are watching. The possible use of video in cultural policy is presented in typical propaganda language:

“One of the most important upcoming tasks for cultural policy will be a qualitative and quantitative stimulation of television production as well as proper storage of the broadcasts on video discs and cassettes. Such recordings should meet individual tastes and the needs of audiences; they should also stimulate audiences to active participation in culture and the protection of national and universal human values.”<sup>64</sup>

In the late 1980s primary and secondary schools as well as local culture centres were provided with VCRs, paid for mostly by local authorities and local state-owned companies. In schools VCRs were used for screening educational movies during physics, chemistry and biology classes. VCRs were even purchased for local rural cultural centres run by the local branches of the district cooperative (Gminna Spółdzielnia, GS), state-owned enterprises responsible for providing commodities and cultural education in rural areas. The

<sup>61</sup> *W Labiryncie* [In the Labyrinth], Episode 20, directed by Paweł Karpiński, aired on 17.05.1989.

<sup>62</sup> JANUSZ GAJDA: *Telewizja, młodzież, kultura* [Television, Youth, Culture], Warszawa 1987.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 28.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 28-29.

purchase of VCRs by such rural culture centres was described by journalists as the successful modernisation of the Polish countryside – another buzzword in the ideological discourse. “Video is a synonym of modernity. The GS in the Gdańsk area [which provided local culture centres with VCRs] are not being left behind by development and modernity. This is clearly visible in the results of their current work.”<sup>65</sup> Statistical data from 1993 shows that VCRs and “video-rooms” could be found in most local urban and rural culture centres.<sup>66</sup>

In the 1990s the discourse of these critics of video discussed the phenomenon unequivocally as labour class entertainment with no positive values. Here is a quite typical description of such entertainment in southern Poland:

“In local villages, former collective farms and lumbering settlements, videocassettes circulate, copied from friends or borrowed from video stores. Initially, my neighbours, who worked as woodcutters and lorry drivers, were fascinated with ‘porns’. Teresa Orłowski and Dolly Buster reigned the screen. However, they rather quickly lost the competition to karate, kung-fu and action movies. Movies currently being watched in labourer dormitory in forsaken lumbering settlements are *The Pumaman*, *Bridge to Hell*, *Hands of Steel*, *Iron Eagle*, *Death Wish*, *Crocodile Hunter*, *Hell comes to Frogtown*, *Demonstone*, *Eastern Condors*.”<sup>67</sup>

Beside the obvious prejudice of movie critics towards popular action movies, it can be assumed that this was a usual scenario for VCR use in rural cultural centres where they were originally supposed to bring modernity and development to the local community.

## 5 State Policy towards Video Culture and the Polish Video Industry

The growth of a video black market was only minimally hindered by the state apparatus. The most important factor in the growth of a black market for pirated movies was the lack of any copyright protection law for electronic media. Despite numerous appeals by movie industry representatives, this issue was completely ignored by law-makers in state socialist Poland. I would suggest that the video black market was simply tolerated as a phenomenon that was not considered a significant problem. Poland in the 1980s had a vast informal economy that was generally tolerated by the authorities.

<sup>65</sup> J. GARLIKOWSKI: Wideo w geesie [Video in the District Cooperative], in: *Głos wybrzeża*, 10.11.1986. In the USSR a similar idea of video education was applied. Local authorities opened “Videocafes” and “alcohol free Video-Disco-Bars”, see ALEXANDER KASAKIEWITSCH: Etablierung des Mediums Video in der sowjetischen Kulturlandschaft, in: *Osteuropa* 38 (1988), pp. A149-A166, here pp. A149-A150.

<sup>66</sup> Kultura w 1993 (as in footnote 33).

<sup>67</sup> MONIKA SZNAJDERMAN: Kultura video w Beskidzie Niskim. Trzecie Życie kina [Video Culture in the Lower Beskid Region. The Third Life of Cinema] in: *Kino* (1993), May, p. 46.

The only potential barrier for the import of pirated movies was the custom's office. According to available sources, custom's officers tried to control the content of imported videocassettes. In some custom's offices VCRs were used to do so. It is difficult to estimate the scale of such controls and archival research that might reveal detailed numbers concerning the scale of such imports and controls has yet to be completed. *Trybuna Ludu* claimed that in early 1987, authorities tried to increase the control of private imports of videocassettes and foreign language publications, the contents of which "depart from the ideological, moral and ethical standards applied in our country".<sup>68</sup> According to data from the customs office in Szczecin, it confiscated every fifth imported videocassette. Of these, 60% were confiscated due to their inconsistency with "Polish moral norms", 30% due to "political content" and 10% due to "extreme violence".<sup>69</sup> In another article, specific statistics from the Central Custom's Office (Główny Urząd Cel) were quoted. Between January and September 1985, 55 116 cassettes were imported to Poland. Of these, 715 were confiscated. In the same nine month period in 1986 only 26 263 cassettes were imported of which 1 221 were confiscated.<sup>70</sup> According to estimates published by journalists, in the second half of the 1980s there were a few million videocassettes in Poland. Data on the confiscation of cassettes clearly shows that authorities could barely control this market.<sup>71</sup> There is no information available on measures taken by the authorities to control the domestic redistribution of cassettes on bazaars and in video stores.

VCRs and blank cassettes were sold by the state-owned Pewex and Baltona retailers for dollars. The introduction of such commodities in state-owned stores was a market-oriented decision taken by these profitable enterprises. Such stores simply aimed to make substantial profits with the sale of VCRs, repair services and the much desired blank cassettes used for making further copies.

Investment in the development of a Polish VCR and the establishment of a state-owned video movies distribution system was also a market-oriented decision. The Polish VCR model – the MTV-100 produced by Unitra – was introduced in late 1986. The introduction of this VCR was presented as huge success by the Polish electronics industry. However, this model was simply a reverse-engineered copy of a few imported VCRs. It was offered for price only slightly lower than imported VCRs, which were still perceived among audiences as technologically more advanced, more reliable and, what is

<sup>68</sup> Komunikat Głównego Urzędu Cel [Communique of the Central Custom's Office], in: *Trybuna Ludu*, 5.02.1987.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>70</sup> Wideokasety i celnicy [Videocassettes and custom's officers], in: *Trybuna Ludu*, 18.02.1987.

<sup>71</sup> The most detailed data concerning the availability and prices of video movies were published in *Polityka*. See GAWEL (as in footnote 32).

probably most important, more fashionable. All kinds of Polish domestic electronic products were perceived as inferior to Japanese and German brands, so it is not a surprise that the MTV-100 was not a commercial success. This model was quickly abandoned and replaced by the MTV-200, developed by similar means and a similar flop on the market, good quality Western VCRs being available on the domestic market for a similar price.

The Polish VCR was supposed to be used primarily to watch Polish movies distributed by a network of state-owned video stores. This plan to establish a new branch in the Polish state-owned culture industry aimed to provide domestic electronic companies and the movie industry with profits from the exploitation of the new medium. But this state-owned network encompassed a very limited number of video stores with a selection of classic Polish movies and a very small selection (about a dozen or so) officially licensed foreign movies.<sup>72</sup>

It is not clear what happened with these state-owned video stores; probably they were simply closed down shortly after the regime change in 1989. Roy Medvedev claims that the video industry in Russia in this time was established by former Komsomol members who used their experience and Komsomol "video viewing centre" structures to start their own businesses.<sup>73</sup> Unfortunately, I was not able to find any reliable information on similar practices in 1990s Poland. The distribution of foreign and Polish movies on video and later DVD from the early 1990s was dominated by private distribution companies such as ITI Home Video (later ITI Cinema), a successful private company founded in 1984. In the late 1990s owners of this company formed the ITI Group, which is today one of the biggest stakeholders not only in the Polish but in the whole eastern European media industry.<sup>74</sup>

It is also important to ask if any state-owned movie distribution systems and Polish television tried to compete with the pirate video market by improving their own product? In the 1970s and 1980s, Polish cinemas and television often screened relatively new American movies. In Polish cinemas, most movies that hit the box office were widely distributed with only slight delays caused as a result of commercial and technical issues. It is worth mentioning that most American box office movies from the era, for instance crime thrillers that showed corrupt and abusive American police or high levels of crime were not in contradiction with communist propaganda practice. Such movies imported as current hits in the United States were welcomed in Poland long before the video era, which makes it difficult to estimate the impact

<sup>72</sup> In the Soviet Union a similar distribution system for classic Russian movies was established. However, audiences frequently used these cassettes to copy pirated Western movies, see STARR (as in footnote 8), p. 39.

<sup>73</sup> ROY MEDVEDEV: *Post-Soviet Russia. A Journey through the Yeltsin Era*, New York 2000, p. 172.

<sup>74</sup> For the history of this company, see <http://www.itiholdings.com/index.php/History/History/> (20.04.2012).

of the video market on the purchasing and screening of movies in cinemas and on television. One case does nevertheless seem to be a direct response to the popularity of action and pornographic movies on video. In the mid-1980s, Polish television began to screen attractive American action, horror and erotic movies (but not pornography) after 11 PM on Saturday nights, in a rubric entitled *Kino nocne* (night cinema). This programme became a popular forum for movies with relatively high degrees of violence and nudity. It is possible that the introduction of this programme was a direct response to the competition of the video market, where such features were omnipresent. Detailed research has yet to be completed on Polish television programming policy.

## 6 Conclusion

A history of the dissemination of video in socialist Poland shows that this media technology, identified with the West, had significant symbolic power for relevant social actors. On the one hand, video movies were perceived by audiences as new form of attractive and fashionable entertainment. On the other hand, a VCR was a symbol of modernity and progress, similarly to a television in the 1960s. Lively discussion among critics and representatives of the movie industry also shows that video was perceived not merely as a new cultural phenomenon, but also as a potentially profitable economy sector. Data on the profits of black marketeers were used to convince stakeholders that establishing a Polish video industry could be a profitable business. However, available sources show that the dissemination of this new media technology was left uncontrolled despite constant appeals to do so. Most studies on the history of the Soviet bloc have emphasised the process of overregulation and censorship in the culture sector. My study shows that, at least in the 1980s, there were some emerging sectors that were left almost completely uncontrolled by state agencies.

The case of the dissemination of video culture in Poland also shows the interdependence of the economy with the field of cultural production.<sup>75</sup> The informal economy entrepreneurs played a significant role in the dissemination of new cultural trends behind the Iron Curtain. Videocassette sellers on the bazaar offering pirated action and pornographic movies from a cardboard box can be understood as an icon of private entrepreneurship of the era. On the other hand, he was also a highly influential representative of popular culture cinema responsible for the shaping of Polish movie tastes. This was definitely a problem for local cultural critics. It is striking that such critics, representatives of Polish intelligentsia in the 1980s, were constantly appealing for the state to introduce a new system of control of the electronic media market and combat not only piracy but also the dissemination of movies deemed worthless and instead support the popularisation of ambitious cinema. It is

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<sup>75</sup> See HARTMUT BERGHOFF, JAKOB VOGEL (ed.): *Wirtschaftsgeschichte als Kulturgeschichte. Dimensionen eines Perspektivenwechsels*, Frankfurt a.M. et al. 2004.

also significant that decision makers simply ignored the whole black video market, with the exception of ineffective attempts to control the import of videocassettes at the border.

It would be interesting to examine the role the video played in shaping the imagination of the West among audiences behind the Iron Curtain. The case of Poland is of limited relevance for such study, since numerous Western movies were screened in Polish cinemas and television long before the dissemination of video. Studies of video culture and the imagination of the West in the Soviet Union or other socialist countries where access to Western culture was more limited could definitely shed light on this issue.

Video played a significant role in the dissemination of popular culture among Polish audiences.<sup>76</sup> However, it will be difficult to discover more details on more specific causes and effects of watching specific popular movie genres among Polish audiences. In watching numerous popular action movies and series such as *James Bond* or *Rambo III*, in which the protagonist kills dozens of Soviet soldiers, Poles had the opportunity to see a Soviet defeat. It is possible that Polish audiences were especially interested in watching such movies. On the other hand, in most action movies of the era, American cops were simply battling American bandits. Such a political explanation is nevertheless irrelevant for the popularity of popular horror, science fiction and martial arts movies. The popularity of video pornography cannot be explained in political terms either.

Instead of focussing on the political aspect of the popularity of video movies, it appears more fruitful to ask about the role of the practices of media consumption in everyday life. In a recent study of the Yugoslav case, Breda Luthar reconstructed the practices of consumption of various goods imported from beyond the Iron Curtain.<sup>77</sup> Expensive VCRs brought from the West personally or acquired on the electronics bazaar there became one of the most recognisable symbols of social status. Moreover, these new media forms could also be easily inserted into existing social practices. In the 1980s the screening of an attractive video movie became a significant part of traditional Sunday dinner held for friends and neighbours. In showing how specific imported commodities, for instance consumer electronics, were given meanings by citizens of the Soviet bloc countries, we can further expand our understanding of the cultural history of this region.

<sup>76</sup> For the general discussion on the dissemination of popular culture in the region, see IVO BOCK, WOLFGANG SCHLOTT et al. (ed.): *Kommerz, Kunst, Unterhaltung. Die neue Popularkultur in Zentral- und Osteuropa*, Bremen 2003.

<sup>77</sup> BREDA LUTHAR: *Shame, Desire and Longing for the West. A Case Study of Consumption*, in: IDEM, MARUŠA PUŠNIK (ed.): *Remembering Utopia. The Culture of Everyday Life in Socialist Yugoslavia*, Washington, DC 2010, pp. 341-378.

## Zusammenfassung

### *Der Videoboom im sozialistischen Polen*

In diesem Artikel soll gezeigt werden, wie sich im sozialistischen Polen der 1980er Jahre die Videotechnologie verbreitete. In den späten 1980er Jahren gab es in polnischen Haushalten schätzungsweise mehr als eine halbe Million Videorecorder und einige Millionen Videokassetten. Die meisten dieser Kassetten wurden dafür benutzt, um Raubkopien populärer Filme, versehen mit einer behelfsmäßigen polnischen Tonspur, abzuspeichern. Zu dieser Zeit war es in Polen eine weit verbreitete Sitte, an Sonntagabenden gemeinsam mit Freunden oder Verwandten Videofilme anzuschauen. Die überaus große Beliebtheit von Video in Polen lag hauptsächlich darin begründet, dass man so Zugang zu zahllosen populären Kinofilmen der 1980er Jahre erhielt, in erster Linie zu Action-, Horror- und nicht zuletzt pornografischen Filmen. Diese Filme wurden hauptsächlich aus Westdeutschland importiert. In dem vorliegenden Beitrag werden die einzelnen sozialen Akteure dargestellt, die Video überhaupt erst populär machten, wobei sich zeigt, dass kulturelle und ökonomische Praktiken voneinander abhängig waren.

Ich beschreibe die Rolle der informellen Wirtschaft und von Kleinunternehmern bei der Popularisierung von Video in Polen. Zudem rekonstruiere ich die Debatte zwischen Kulturkritikern und Vertretern der Filmindustrie, die einerseits bei den zuständigen Politikern darauf drangen, Video in die staatliche Kulturpolitik, mit der die „kulturelle Erziehung der Gesellschaft“ verbessert werden sollte, einzubeziehen. Andererseits erkannten die Kritiker, wie profitabel das Geschäft mit Videofilmen war. Sie forderten deshalb, dass der Staat in die polnische Videoindustrie investieren sollte, um sich einen Anteil an diesem bisher von Raubkopierern beherrschten Markt zu sichern. Meine Untersuchung zeigt jedoch, dass seitens des Staates keine einheitliche Politik gegenüber dieser Medientechnologie verfolgt wurde. Der Video-Schwarzmarkt wurde eher toleriert und blieb ohne Kontrolle. So wurde z.B. erst 1994 erstmals ein Gesetz zum Schutz des Copyrights im Bereich elektronischer Medien erlassen. Vor 1989 wurde lediglich in die Entwicklung und die Vermarktung polnischer Videorecorder investiert. Dieser Versuch scheiterte, weil die polnische Elektronikindustrie nicht mit den billigen und qualitativ hochwertigen japanischen Fabrikaten mithalten konnte. Das staatliche polnische Videovertriebssystem war ebenfalls ein Fehlschlag. Nach 1989 wurde dieser Markt rasch von privaten Medienunternehmen übernommen, die von Geschäftsleuten geführt wurden, die als Betreiber von privaten Videoläden im sozialistischen Polen Erfahrung gesammelt hatten.