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Small Media Normality for the East

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...but it isn't a continuum of propoganda and subordination, but rather, an alternating between the giving and withdrawal of meaning that can create a space in which the thinking of the listener can move freely, and with it, understanding can come about.

Heiner Goebbels: Prince and the Revolution

1. Autopoietic Europe

In our imagination, eastern Europe was always black and white. Traveling to East Germany or Poland meant suddenly leaving colorful western Europe and entering a movie from the forties or fifties. Later we simply couldn't remember having seen any color, not the green of the trees, nor the red of the brick buildings. When we went to the movies to see a film by Wajda, Kieslowski or Tarkowsky, the filmmaker's experiments with color only reinforced our image of the east as gray. Europe clearly had an ideologically motivated neurosis when it came to the perception of color.

This particular brand of European Orientalism has now grown tired. Nearly ten years after the social upheaval in eastern Europe, these countries have ceased being part of an "eastern bloc". Each is stepping out of the shadow of the Soviet empire and taking on once again its own particular face in the international arena. Each is becoming recognizable as a participating unit of the European patchwork.

While the European Union attempts to somehow defend the idea of a Fortress Europe and the negotiations with the central European countries for their admission into it reveal its own shortcomings, while NATO uses its plans for expansion to try to hold onto the front of the Cold War by pushing it eastward, while the arms of western Europe are constantly opening and closing, opening and closing to refugees and migrants, the network of business contacts and personal acquaintances branches outward, bringing the Europe of Europeans slowly but surely closer together. Small media such as letters, the fax, local radio and Internet mailing lists are contributing far more to mutual understanding than governmental objects of prestige such as the German-French television project ARTE or the exclusive efforts of the European

Commission. In order to understand European differences and put them to productive use, swarms of little sentences, of little images are needed.

Of course, genuine heroes do occasionally appear on the domestic screens. In the mid-eighties, a new pop star emerged on the global media scene: Gorby Superstar, a Soviet Secretary General who could walk, talk and laugh, a real guy, even if he was a Russian. After the senilocracy of the period of stagnation beginning in the mid-seventies, from 1985 on, Gorbachev set off on his travels, speaking to his own people about Glasnost and Perestroika, signaling his willingness to open up a dialogue with Reagan, presenting himself as a decent, charming sort of fellow to Thatcher, and almost penitently to the Pope, chatting with Kohl, building trust -- and all that in front of television cameras. Finally, here was a salesman who was as good as the western advertising agencies are at selling bad politics like cola and ice cream, who could play the modern propaganda machine better than NATO and the Communist Party combined.

No wonder that for the other countries of the Warsaw Pact -- East Germany, for example -- Gorbachev was to become a factor of ideological insecurity, and therefore, a domestic political threat. In June 1987, three British rock groups played a concert at the Brandenburger Tor. They turned the speakers to the east where thousands of young people had gathered to listen to the concert. When the situation built to a confrontation with the East German security forces, they called out not only "Down with the Wall!" but also "Gorbachev, Gorbachev!" because they presumed he was on their side in this matter. Two years later, at the celebration for the fortieth anniversary of the German Democratic Republic, Gorbachev himself justified the presumption with the words he delivered to the gentlemen of the State Council of East Berlin. They'd come too late and would immediately be punished by life, the demonstrating masses and the television viewing public.

The changes set off by the Gorbachev fan club occurred at a time when things seemed to have actually happened when a camera was present. Like the fall of the Berlin Wall, the second Gulf War, the coup in Russia or the televised revolution in Romania can be classified first and foremost as media events. Politics, national as well as international, is increasingly becoming merely a reaction to media events, to whatever is perceived by the media, and consequently, the public which forces its hand. Supposedly, President Clinton's advisors decided in 1992 that the war in Yugoslavia was not of U.S. national interest, and so, kept relevant information from the president. This changed when Clinton happened to see television reports about the siege of Sarajevo in a Tokyo hotel and insisted on U.S. intervention.

Such influence of the media, and at the moment, particularly television, is, of course, not news. As early as the First World War, battles were fought or halted as a result of public opinion on the home front. And the photographers of the nineteenth century and Greek philosophers were also aware that media representation did not merely reflect, but rather, constructed reality. This is why it's difficult to determine how the famous Parisian reality crisis came about exactly in the eighties (1). One fortunate consequence of the Party's propaganda was that the media on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain was never perceived as the source of reality production, whereas in the west, this illusion was clung to fiercely. The techniques of dealing with media

such as whispering, turning a deaf ear or reading between the lines are aspects of such useful central European virtues -- hesitancy, skepticism and irony.

Throughout the Cold War, the public propaganda machines of the east and west told their great stories of the crime-ridden system of exploitation and of the Evil Empire. At the same time, the readers and watchers in the east were better prepared for what was to follow and what now not only affects the pseudo-east, namely, learning how to live, as the Agentur Bilwet put it, in the society of the debacle. The creative engagement with the impossible, the avoidance of the seemingly necessary, the refusal to identify oneself negatively with inevitable failure -- Motto: The reward of playing dumb is free time -- those are the survival tactics of the post-industrial society. The small narratives of this tradition most commonly told by the little independent propaganda machines, the pamphlet distributors and poster plasterers, the local pirate radio stations, student papers and the networks circulating forbidden books and records. This isn't so much a romanticized review as a glance into the toolbox of the everyday media.

2. Eastern Europe Watching

One of the first lessons to be learned as the Iron Curtain rose was that the east bloc was hardly a bloc at all in the sense of a homogeneous, solid whole. Various mentalities and various socialisms had been brought together under red flags large and small which waved more for the big brother than for the other siblings. Distance, and often a deep skepticism, separated the countries of the Warsaw Pact. In 1985, the Hungarian author György Dalos described a few of the reasons for the differences between the small central and eastern European nations: "Their religious backgrounds are different: Catholic, Protestant, Russian Orthodox and Islamic traditions live next to each other and the historical experiences are not any less divergent. There are countries in which tremendous revolutions occurred in the nineteenth century (Hungary, Poland); there are those where none have occurred (Romania, Czechoslovakia). A few of the countries in the region have mixed populations (Romania, the Soviet Union), and in others, national minorities are insignificant. The overall picture is further politically differentiated according to whether the individual countries were allies of Nazi Germany during the Second World War or were members of the anti-fascist coalition. Besides these past differences, or those which can be attributed to the past, there are those that derive from the current situation in the individual countries. Among these are size, economic strength, the level of consumerism, the role of the public, freedom of movement, etc." (2)

Since the beginning of the nineties, these historical and cultural differences have been importantly instrumental in the race to the west. Slavoj Žižek, psychoanalyst and student of Lacan, upon whose couch in Ljubljana the New Europe lies, has said, regarding these revived and strategic differences: "What's truly at stake in the current crises of the post-socialist states is precisely the fight for one's own place now that the illusion of the 'third way' has dissipated: Who will be 'let in', integrated into the developed capitalist order, and who will be shut out? Ex-Yugoslavia is perhaps the exemplary case: Each player in this bloody game of collapse attempts to legitimize its

place 'within' by presenting itself as the last bastion of European civilization (the current shorthand for the capitalist 'within') against Oriental barbarism." (3)

And then Žižek describes a game also being played in East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, etc., etc. -- a postmodern variation of "Who's 'It'?": "For the right-wing nationalists in Austria, there are these imaginary borders of the Karawanken, the mountain range along the border between Austria and Slovenia: Just beyond it begins the realm of the Slavic hordes. For the national Slovenians, this border is the Kolpa River, separating Slovenia from Croatia: We are central Europe, while the Croats are already part of the Balkans, entangled in irrational ethnic feuds which don't actually have anything to do with us -- we're on their side, and have sympathy for them in the way one has sympathy for victims of aggression in the Third World... For the Croats, this all-important border is naturally the one between them and the Serbs, that is, the one between western Catholic civilization and the Eastern Orthodox collective spirit which cannot fathom the values of western individualism. And finally, the Serbs believe they are the last line of defense for Christian Europe against the fundamentalist danger embodied by the Islamic Albanians and Bosnians. (By now it should be clear who within the borders of what used to be Yugoslavia actually acts in a civilized 'European' manner: those who are on the bottom rung of this ladder, the ones shut out by all the others -- Albanians and Muslim Bosnians.)" (4)

Only in Russia, the game is played the other way around. A few of our friends in St. Petersburg, all of them artists and intellectuals, insist that Russia is not a part of Europe, but rather, of Asia. They were born and raised in Siberia, Kasachstan or the Ural, and refer to what Tartar blood they have within them and speak of Petersburg as a Russian simulation what is "European". So Europe then stretches from England, which itself speaks of Europe as a foreign continent, to Russia, perhaps the last great empire of the nineteenth century where the denial of Europe justifies the claim on the Asian colonies.

Besides these attempts to draw borders and to be west of the east, there have always been attempts on the part of European intellectuals to come to an agreement to do away with borders altogether. At critical points in history such as 1956 (the Hungarian uprising), 1968 (Prague Spring), 1977 (Charta 77, Prague), 1979 - 1981 (the Solidarity movement in Poland), or in connection with the arrest or extradition of dissidents such as Biermann, Solzhenitsyn, Havel or Sakharov, great international movements of solidarity took hold which insisted on human rights without borders and which referred to the existence of a multitude of unofficial channels of communication. Another important moment in the history leading up to 1989 was the revival of the idea of central Europe (Mitteleuropa) by philosophers and writers during the eighties. The debate was intended not only to counter the hegemony of the Soviet Union but also to revive the memory of a time when Europe was not divided down the middle. In 1985, Vaclav Havel wrote about the skepticism of the central Europeans: "A bit secretive, a bit nostalgic, often tragic, at times even heroic, now and then even a bit incomprehensible in their unassuming awkwardness, tender cruelty and in their ability to combine the outward appearance of provinciality with universal and historical foresight." (5) It was this sort of contradictory overlapping in the understanding of what "Europe" is that ensured that the debate over the many

centers of the continent -- Brussels, Cracow, Berlin, Sarajevo... -- could so quickly slip out of the Washington-Moscow hyperbola.

There was also a plethora of varying maps in the media, a transparency and translucency of borders, not only to the west but also within the east. Hence 80% of East Germans could receive West German television with their normal household antennae, and only in the Valley of the Clueless, the southeastern region around Dresden, was anyone safe from the onslaught of western propaganda. But there, they had Polish and Czech television, and so, a differentiated image of the various televisual standpoints of the states in the neighboring countries. In western Romania, as the Romanian-German author Richard Wagner reports, besides the Romanian program, one could also catch the Yugoslavian and the Bulgarian. Wagner writes in one of his stories: "The game's about to begin, he says. The Serbs are showing the derby on TV. And there's going to be a movie tonight. With the one with the big tits. You can actually see something when they show it. They don't just cut the whole scene out like ours do." (6)

Besides the national television stations and the official papers which, as Karl Schlögel notes, were just as thin everywhere with the same bad photos and the same chemically sanitized articles, the international western radio stations with their much wider broadcast area, such as the BBC World Service or the Deutsche Welle, played an extremely important role in the distribution of news and discussions which were not reported by the state media of eastern Europe. Of overwhelming importance was the U.S. Radio Free Europe which, from its base in Munich, reached all of central and eastern Europe as a dissidents' broadcaster and mouthpiece of the American standpoint during the Cold War.

And of course, on the local level there was an abundance of small unofficial media, niche media which were often short-lived and yet maintained an exchange of information and communication which, according to the official version, could not exist. Records and audio cassettes were just as effective and meaningful, as well as jokes passed on by word of mouth -- Radio Eriwan! -- traced maps and endlessly circulating copies of books. In countries where no private use of photocopying equipment was allowed under any circumstances, a multitude of illegal publication strategies for the distribution of ideas were invented, most of which were referred to by the umbrella term Samisdat. A related principle was *ramka*, which was originally Polish but then spread to Hungary and elsewhere. Miklos Haraszti writes: "The *ramka* in the east is the equivalent of the photocopier in the west. The recipe for *ramka* goes like this: Soviet power minus electrification. By the way, this cross of silk screen and offset printer can be built in two hours at home -- and is capable of several thousand impressions. There are times when the police, like worrisome gardeners, mow down the boldly sprouting Samisdat to the roots. But the *ramka* is ineradicable. *Ramka* is virtual freedom of the press; he with the fingers smeared black with ink, the human rights professional, points to the free, electronic future." (7) In these times of electronic networking, we should not forget that a hand press can have a practical dignity which the Internet, with its susceptibility to control, will never attain.

3. Soluble History

Each of the central and eastern European "revolutions" in the eighties has its own history and series of events in each country: From the Polish "interruptus" to the aborted Russian perestroika and the Hungarian slippage to the capitalist goulash, the abrupt collapse of the East German regime to the brutal Romanian Christmas story. In the Baltics, it was song, in Prague, soft-spoken words, in Berlin, candles and bad shoes that rang in the new era.

Although it's clear now in retrospect that there was a certain logic in the developments of the late eighties, from Gorbachev's perestroika, the political liberalization in Hungary and Poland to the occupation of the West German embassy in Prague and Warsaw by East German citizens in the summer of 1989, the events that late autumn came in a form which was more or less unexpected. The western media were all over these events, or rather: they wanted to be all over them. Because the events were hard to come by in terms of flight schedules and hotel bookings. Where should a U.S. or Japanese television programmer send a camera crew at the beginning of December 1989: to Berlin to wait for the opening of the Brandenburger Tor, to Prague where the students were out in the streets, or to dark gray Bucharest where a Transylvanian self-laceration might occur. Once again, life was punishing those who came too late. Impossible choices and a bonanza for television viewers with a satellite dish who could zap their way among the various glances into the events of the day by watching the news from Berlin, Bonn, Paris, London and Atlanta all at once.

The result was a blanket of suspenseful media happenings that went on for weeks, and we even forgave the live media the endless repetition of the same video footage, over and over. It was here that life was happening, here that history was happening right in front of our eyes. And not just for western television viewers, but also and especially for the people in the countries themselves, the medium of television was serving an important catalytic function. For weeks, the people of Leipzig watched their Monday marches on western television and went out on the streets in even greater numbers the following week. After all, in the end they'd attained their Warholian fifteen minutes of fame. At the symposium "The Media are with us!", held as early as April 1990 in Budapest, the art critic Magda Carneci said of the role of television in the Romanian revolution: "Television wasn't simply a giant, tireless eye that continuously beamed the absolutely irrepressible images, but it also served as something of a collective brain: It received, selected and distributed news throughout the whole nation which was utterly essential for the coordination and upholding of the fighting spirit, and created a state of consciousness which was coherently directed toward battle, awareness and victory. Television made the entire population a sort of highly sensitive network within which each individual took part in the act of revolution, both physically and mentally. (...) In a certain way, television justified the revolution for most people." (8)

A short time later, the revolutionary reality, in the light of the great number of competing authentic documents of the collective experience, naturally ran up against doubt. Hardly four months after the events in December, Carneci remarked: "Since the first days of the revolution, things have rapidly changed. What one sees now on

television about the Romanian revolution is becoming, it seems to me, more and more a fiction." (9) Similar adjustments occurred in East Germany and in Czechoslovakia where competing versions of the history circulated and called the victory of the little revolutionaries in the street into question. Within a few weeks, what seemed authentic at first on the screen as well as on location, was revealed to have an inextricable and contradictory complexity, especially as journalists ceaselessly continued their search for new "facts". Reality and fiction were brought closer together and then blended into each other. The supposed experience of *"instant history"* had proven itself to be as authentic as a cup of instant, soluble coffee: *"If you believe in me, I exist."*

For the west, there was the additional difficulty of distilling ways to deal with all that had been gathered by the media. While the good guys and the bad guys were still clearly distinguishable in 1989, and hence, an optimistic, futuristic look ahead was all that was required, the western perception of the war in Yugoslavia from 1992 onward was considerably less sure of itself. But how can a politically and historically complex story be packed into three and a half minutes. Western intellectuals such as Peter Handke, Alain Finkelkraut and Susan Sontag went to Belgrade, Zagreb and Sarajevo in search of the "authenticity of experience" and the "reality of life", a search that had brought German and French artists and intellectuals to opposing trenches in 1914. And while historians and military strategists quarreled over the formulas for understanding and intervention, the media created a perception of a declining slope which would force action. But the media achieved the opposite and the reports on the war in the Balkans led to paralysis in western observers instead of the will to intervene. The media triumph of 1989, when the media could make history, met its Verdun in Dubrovnik, Srebrenica, Gorazde and Sarajevo, where it couldn't prevent history from happening.

4. "Open Society" and "New World Order"

The absurdity of the "end of history" (Fukuyama), an idea which seemed to some almost tangible in 1989, was made all the more blatant by the sudden "return of history". And yet: the short moment between the supposed zero hour of history and the unexpected "entry into the present" (10) briefly revealed an astounding piece of theater. In the fall of 1989, the Australian media critic McKenzie Wark sits in front of his television, following the events in Europe, which for him are a part of the ongoing global media spectacle creating illusions of identity and history out of images and snippets of stories: "One thinks of Europe in 1989 as the opening night at the theater where the curtain goes up and the audience comes face to face - with another audience. One has to be outside the theater altogether to see the whole thing together as one big spectacular show." (11) The western public had followed the revolutions of 1989 with enthusiasm, but the object of the fascinated gaze was not the mere new discovery of democracy as such: Those in the west are all too well aware of the shortcomings and cul-de-sacs of real, existing liberal democracy to be fascinated by it. What fascinated the western "viewer" was much more, as Zizek's Slovenian colleague Rado Riha writes, *"an assumed fascination without reservation on the part of the eastern European with western democracy, the naive, blind, as it were, belief in it. This is how the west looked to the east to see confirmation of its*

own truth. (...) In the assumed fascination with democracy of the eastern Europeans, the westerner could see himself in his 'pure' form, not yet tainted by empirical disillusion and false steps, and grasp the untarnished origin of his democratic being." (12)

Strengthened by this supposed naive gaze from the east onto the fascinating west, actors of the most varied of stripes (sects, banks, parties, private set ups and non-governmental organizations [NGOs]) began a race to see who would be the first to bless the east and hope some of their luck will rub off on them. The "new world order" proclaimed by George Bush at the end of the eighties found its first expression in the occupation of the east by ideological pioneers. In Croatia alone, 790 representatives of international or regional NGOs are currently witness to an unbelievable boom in the private sector. At present, the vacuum left by the retreat of the state and public supervision in many post-socialist countries of eastern Europe is being filled by the unregulated activities of NGOs.

NGOs are active on a broad range of social terrains and are generally perceived as the "voice of civil society". They support the upholding of human rights (for example, amnesty international) or environmental protection (Greenpeace) or offer humanitarian aid (for example, the International Red Cross). NGOs are financed by companies, foundations, private individuals, regional or global bodies (for example, the EC or the UNHCR) or governments (USAID).

One of the most important and influential NGOs in eastern Europe today is the "Soros Foundation for an Open Society". Besides its engagement in the areas of education, humanitarian aid, human rights, art and culture (via the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art [SCCA]) as well as its support for social, legal and economic reform, this foundation is particularly engaged in the creation and support for independent media (for example, Radio Zid in Sarajevo, Arkzin in Zagreb, Radio B92 in Belgrade, the daily newspaper Koha Joone in Albania, as well as Internet and email communication). By financing media, organizations and projects independent of the governments, the development of a new political consciousness is to be encouraged, and with it, a corner stone is laid for the development of a civil society, or "open society". With its support for new eastern European democracy movements, the Soros Foundation has not always won the approval of the respective governments.

The Soros Foundation, created by the Hungarian-American multimillionaire and philanthropist George Soros, takes its cue from Karl Popper's concept of the "open society". In his book "The Open Society and Its Enemies" (1940), Popper turned against historicism, i.e., against the idea that it's possible to recognize the fundamental laws of historical development and predict future developments based on these fundamental laws: whether that be that the revealed will of God is the victory of a chosen race, laws of dialectics and/or the inevitable social-economic processes which are to determine the course and outcome of history. Each attempt to create and realize a complete concept of human society, according to Popper, is destined to failure and will lead to the loss of freedom -- to a closed society: "The attempt to create heaven on earth produces hell instead."

The "Soros Foundation" network, established in the eighties, now consists of around thirty autonomous national foundations in almost every post-socialist country of central and southeastern Europe, the former Soviet Union and central Asia. The Open Society Institutes (OSI) in New York and Budapest provide for the work of the national foundations the necessary administrative, financial and technical needs (a total of US\$350 million in 1995). The Central European University (CEU; at first in Warsaw, Budapest and Prague, now only in Warsaw and Budapest) and the since closed Open Media Research Institute (OMRI; an extension of the Munich-based Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute) are also a part of this empire of beneficence.

Due to either insufficient or completely lacking alternative support -- from the public or private sectors -- George Soros' foundations in eastern Europe have become in many places the only source of financing for independent projects. Considerable sums of money flow here which are subject to neither democratic control nor any form of governmental regulation. Soros' "open society" implies parallel structures similar to governments populated by the new bureaucrats. The resulting problems relate to the sovereignty of a country as well as the possible economic interests are obvious to John Horvath: "The most likely use of the ISF [International Soros Foundation], however, would seem to be as a means for shrewd market penetration in an economically prostrate region. By concentrating on the media and telecommunications infrastructure development, to what extent is the ISF building a Soros-controlled telecommunications empire that spans from the Pacific to Central Europe?" (13)

Numerous opinions are circulating regarding Soros' "true" motivations and he's prime fodder for conspiracy theorists. His strategies sway between selfless philanthropy, western capitalist utilitarianism and alternative concepts of the state and society, an approach which, when compared to the "Mother Theresa Syndrome" of other NGOs, can only be called the "Father George Strategy". A more selfless, perhaps more Protestant variation, for example, would be represented by the Dutch organization Press Now which, based in Amsterdam, has supported the maintenance and further development of independent media in former Yugoslavia for years. Small radio stations outside of the cities, weekly magazines of the opposition and individual journalists are often unbureaucratically supported -- not easy in a situation of perpetual political-tectonic shifts.

Of course Press Now also often finds itself facing moral dilemmas or political pressures; how does one measure the political independence of radio broadcasters such as Radio 101 in Zagreb or Zid in Sarajevo? And the national governments in Slovenia, Croatia or Serbia naturally have their own positions on the possibility that difficult spirits, whom they very well might consider to be dangerous radicals, might be kept alive by foreign forces. But the structures upon which Press Now bases its work are founded on the contacts between individuals and small groups, and it's such personal contact that also provides the motivation for many of the invitations, trips and projects which independent state supported organizations such as Press Now and its employees make possible.

5. Everyday Media Art

The borders between journalistic practice and artistic methods are not always sharply delineated. Since 1989, the eastern European media landscape has been in upheaval: It began with a sort of media supernova which resulted in an explosion of commercial radio and television broadcasters. For a while, the public media presented a playground for artists and media activists. The Romanian artist Calin Dan, who now lives in Holland if they'll allow him to, wrote in 1995: "In Romania, the media environment turned from an ideological desert (prior to December 1989) to a complete jungle. Everything began with the printed media revolution, which created from the very beginning a climate of vulgarity, violence, new-age fabulations, and conspiracy theories. The local pulp fictions and the big global truths were blended in a way that flattened the senses and modified attention. The new radio-scape became another example of the media environment as numerous independent radio stations mushroomed immediately after the revolution, and Bucharest became one of the most interesting radio broadcast cities in Europe." (14)

A friend of ours who was in Skopje in 1995 also reports on a new, extravagant television experience: Late one evening, "The Third Man" was shown by the first program of national Macedonian television. She was delighted; thanks to German television, she had never seen this film in the original English version. Or perhaps, one should say heard -- there wasn't much to see of the picture. First, there were French subtitles over which, after a few moments of hesitation, Macedonian subtitles were superimposed. The subtitles covered half the picture. In the upper right hand corner, the logo of the western television program which had originally broadcast the film was visible, and the upper left hand corner of the picture was covered by the logo of the Macedonian national broadcaster. Our friend was perplexed. When she asked her Macedonian host about the meaning behind it all, the host replied that surely she had seen the huge satellite dish on top of the roof of the national broadcasting building. She should simply think of it as a sort of giant vacuum cleaner switched to "ultrahigh". All the data sucked up was either stored or immediately broadcast on television.

Enes Zlatar from Sarajevo, an employee of the newly set up Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) there, has a similar report on the media scene in Bosnia after the war: "Independent production of home videos continues. The national TV experiences programmatic and productional involution. The only TV show made by young, creative and professional authors, within the youth programme, is a monthly show, 'Vatrene Ulice' (Streets on Fire). There is a new phenomenon of emergence of many small, local TV stations which do not have an interest for author production. The programmes of these stations consist mainly of stolen satellite programmes and bootleg films on VHS."

Strategies and forms of media art were and still are quite different in the individual countries due to the varying possibilities for free access to new media (for example, video cameras, computers, photocopiers, etc.) as well as varying degrees to which "independent" mass media and "divergent" opinions are put up with. For example, while the so-called subcultural or alternative scene in Yugoslavia -- especially in Slovenia -- has been working with video since the early eighties, and Yugoslavian

television -- late in the evening, but still! -- showed experimental videos, and video art in the eighties in Poland and Hungary could lean on the experimental films of the seventies for support, the situation in countries such as Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Romania or Bulgaria was entirely different because access to the technical means was not possible, for either political or economic reasons. Despite the difficulties, the group "Piratskoe Televidenie" (Pirate Television, 1988 - 92) in Petersburg produced alternative, eccentric and mostly illogical television programs which were to be fed into the state television channels with the help of military broadcasting equipment.

Varying strategies in the field of performance as well: While in the eighties the multimedia art collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (New Slovenian Art), fronted by the rock group Laibach, relentlessly "overidentified" with the socialist ideology of Yugoslavia, publicly and loudly, stirring the audience and the state into a rage, the Czechoslovakian secret organization B.K.S. (Bude Konec Sveta -- the end of the world is nigh) worked since the mid-seventies in hiding on the creation of their own laws, their own structures, their own rituals and their own mythology, their own art and their own tradition; in short, an autonomous culture.

After the analog avant-garde of the eighties, media art went digital in the nineties. New media centers and initiatives have been set up in the last few years in several post-socialist countries of eastern Europe. They focus on various forms of media art and Internet projects and are increasingly taking an active role in global digital culture. The E-Lab in Riga, the WWW Art Center in Moscow, C3 (Center for Culture and Communication) in Budapest, the SCCA Media Lab in Macedonian Skopje and in Bulgarian Sofia are just a few examples.

6. Critical Technology

Bart Rijs hit upon an astounding insight in his article in Volkskrant (December 2, 1996): Not only has -- as Rijs' headline claims -- the revolution in Serbia started with a home page on the Internet, no: "Even revolutions aren't what they used to be, since there is internet. The times of illegal printing-presses in wet cellars, seditious pamphlets spread by revolutionaries in duffle coats, are over." One could almost come to the conclusion that the author has fallen victim to the temptations of utopian technophilia: the Internet as the subject of history -- the revolutionary home page as the perfect example of the liberating power of computers and the Internet. The conclusion would perhaps be drawn too quickly, according to John Horvath, because ultimately, the revolution is being carried out by Serbians, not the Internet community. Internet access in Serbia is rare. Not that the home page put up by protesting students is useless, on the contrary: it provides *us* with a personal view of the development of events. But attributing revolutionary qualities to media and technologies leads to a crude misunderstanding of the situation, says John Horvath: "No doubt John Perry Barlow et al will distort the reality of what is happening and start extolling the revolutionary virtues of the Internet, thereby missing the whole point of what is going on in Belgrade and, to some extent, downgrade the heroism and courage of those who still revert to the 'by-gone methods' of 'illegal printing-presses in wet cellars' and 'seditious pamphlets spread by revolutionaries in duffle coats'."

(15) In a country in which "new" media have still not been widely distributed, the value of the "old" media should not be underestimated.

At the same time, these winter protests of 1996 - 97 in Belgrade, crowned with a certain success, provide a good example of the surprising power that the supporting help from the Internet can bring about. The local radio station B92, the Soros-supported hotbed of cultural and political opposition in the Serbian capital, had been regularly placing news programs in English and Serbian on the Internet as audio files since the fall of 1996, thereby making them accessible to an international audience. When the protests in November and December began to grow stronger, journalists throughout the world, including the widely dispersed Serbian diaspora could hear the latest news firsthand. When the Serbian government tried to put a stop to their independent reporting by jamming and then cutting off B92's transmissions, the manufacturer of RealAudio software presented the station the opportunity to broadcast its program live twenty-four hours a day across the Internet. Local radio, which is only heard over an area of a few city blocks in Belgrade was suddenly the most well-known radio station in the world, its signal accessible via a server of the Amsterdam Internet service XS4ALL. The attention of the international public which this aroused put further pressure on the Milosevic regime and may well have contributed, after three months of protest, to the eventual recognition of the election results.

Informal networks, newsgroups and Internet mailing lists which are often used by hundreds of people to keep in contact and exchange news and discussions also play a significant role in the spreading of critical information. A prominent example is the Nettime list devoted to Net criticism and numerous related themes, from censorship and cryptography to Net art and the WebTV of the future. Nettime, brought to life and moderated by Pit Schultz in Berlin and Geert Lovink in Amsterdam, is an intricate channel, an intellectual medium and an international community, primarily European, but also with members from other continents, the best sort of quick, tactical small medium which not coincidentally has been called "the European answer to Wired" (Wark).

The use of technology in art and media does not necessarily imply either a fundamentally critical or -- as the politically correct among us still have not tired of saying -- a per se affirmative position regarding technology. It becomes interesting when one asks in what way technology is normative for cultural and social behavior and in what way it has unifying effects on this behavior. In the broadest sense, the question is one of how far technology allows or hinders individual artistic expression. Does the introduction of technology -- and the immanently unifying or "normative" tendencies of translocal technologies -- even lead to a dissolution of cultural differences, or, toned down: does it hinder specific local means of expression? Can technology be "culturally neutral" at all? Or -- this was the question brought up at a symposium in Prague in December 1996 -- "Does media art imply [a] kind of thinking which is West-oriented and linear, masculine, etc.?" Promptly, from Bratislava, came Martin Sperka's just as difficult opposing question: "Feminist thinking is East-oriented and non-linear?"

The meaning of media cultural practice is not only technological and translocal in nature, but also constantly unfolds in local contexts. A careful look at local cultures and local codes is therefore urgently required. Various artists from eastern Europe have repeatedly referred to the meaning of the always disrupted relationship to "the media". The Albanian artist Eduard Muka said in an interview in 1996: "We inherited a sort of hatred towards the media. There were a lot of lies, nothing was exact, there was only propaganda. Still there is only one state television channel and it is even worse than it used to be. The distrust towards media could be a good starting point for artists to make their critical approach in regards to media. I look at media as the highest degree of manipulation humanity has ever invented. In this sense, this could be really used [to] raising social or individual imperatives." (16) Lev Manovich, too, prompted by Alexej Shulgin's polemical text "Art, Power and Communication", underscores the meaning of varying experiences: "The experiences of East and West structure how new media is seen in both places. For the West, interactivity is a perfect vehicle for the ideas of democracy and equality. For the East, it is yet another form of manipulation, in which the artist uses advanced technology to impose his / her totalitarian will on the people." (17)

The "heterogenizing" of this sort of thinking in blocs could well be the task of small media. The Agentur Bilwet wrote in 1995 in "Society of Debacle": "If, as Kroker maintains, in the new Europe, with its new, invisible, electronic war, everything is about 'the bitter division of the world into virtual flesh and surplus flesh', then it is up to the independent media like Zamir, B92 and ARKZIN to ridicule this split, and in an ironic, existential manner, to give shape to the universal technological desire, cyberspace."

7. Going East, Going West

Traveling in Europe is still difficult but is becoming simpler and more normal. The borders are more porous, even if visa matters and language differences still hinder the movement of people, goods and ideas. Slowly the incline is decreasing and a rediscovery of a not exclusively historical cultural space in Europe is beginning.

Seen cynically, cities such as Sarajevo, Moscow and Tirana have been the unrecognized cultural capitals of Europe for years (which other European city has one seen as many pictures of as these?), where the hardcore European cultural inheritance is negotiated, the average of which is allowed to present itself in Copenhagen, Antwerp and Prague. But why are Albania, the "Balkans", Russia, Chechnya, etc., covered so thoroughly by the media? Certainly not because they are a "normal" part of Europe, but rather because they maximize the production of media reports. The bloodier it is, the more mass media (especially television) can report live on extraordinary situations (choosing from "ethnic cleansing", governmental collapse, bloody uprisings, human tragedies, separations, various attempts at coups). The media image of eastern Europe has been characterized by extraordinary situations; normality is hardly ever communicated.

The importance of the "small media" on the other hand is that they are able -- as opposed to the "big media" -- to get across something of the "normality" and to make

understanding possible. The "small stories" as an alternative to the "grand narratives". This is what we call the small media normality for the east.

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[translated by David Hudson, Berlin]

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Footnotes:

- 1 Spearheaded by the European post-reality heroes Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio
- 2 *Kursbuch* 81, Berlin 1985, p. 4
- 3 Slavoj Zizek, 'The Malaise in Liberal Democracy', in *Heaven Sent*, Nr. 5, Frankfurt/M. 1992, pp. 47 - 48
- 4 *Ibid*, pp. 47 - 48
- 5 *Kursbuch* 81, Berlin 1985, p. 40
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 128
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 31
- 8 Magda Cârnci, 'Die rumänische Revolution und das Fernsehen', in: Peter Weibel (ed), *Von der Bürokratie zur Telekratie. Rumänien im Fernsehen*, Berlin: Merve, 1990, pp. 19 - 21
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 22
- 10 Karl Schlögel, *Go East oder Die zweite Entdeckung des Ostens*, Berlin: Siedler, 1995, p. 9
- 11 McKenzie Wark, *Virtual Geography. Living with global media events*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994, p.60
- 12 Rado Riha, *Reale Geschehnisse der Freiheit. Zur Kritik der Urteilskraft in Lacanscher Absicht*, WO ES WAR 3, Vienna: Turia & Kant, 1993, pp. 14 -15
- 13 John Horvath, 'The Soros Network', Nettime mailing list, Feb. 7, 1997 and *Telepolis Journal* <<http://www.heise.de/tp>>, Jan. 31, 1997
- 14 Calin Dan, 'Romania - A Right to Virtuality: Media Institutions are the Lab Pets of Social Research in Times of Peace because Media are the best War Simulators', in: Nina Czegledy (ed.), *In Sight: Media Art from the Middle of Europe*, Toronto: XYZ Artists' Outlet, 1995, p.30
- 15 John Horvath, 'Re: The Revolution in Serbia begins with a Homepage on the Internet', *Syndicate mailing list*, Jan. 1997
- 16 Eduard Muka, Interview with Geert Lovink, 'Media Art in Albania, First Steps', *Syndicate mailing list*, Sept. 29, 1996
- 17 Lev Manovich, 'On Totalitarian Interactivity', *Syndicate mailing list*, Sept. 1996