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Just Noise?*

E. H. Gombrich, one of the most influential art historians of the twentieth century, one-time director of the Warburg Institute in London, worked as a so-called monitor and later as a monitoring supervisor, between 1939 and 1945 at the “Listening Post” of the B.B.C. In his Creighton Lecture in 1969 he summarized his experiences, later published under the title *Myth and Reality in German War-Time Broadcasts*.¹ Gombrich claimed that “I am not sure that German home broadcasts ever got away from the basic conception of the loudspeaker as an amplifier of the political meeting. Throughout the first year of the war its professed highlights were the carefully managed relays of Hitler’s or Goebbels’ speeches which were invariably held in front of responsive and well-drilled audiences.”

Until the early 1960s the propaganda machinery of the Communist world tried hard to follow the German example: “People were encouraged to listen in groups, in factories and barracks, for the idea of the hearer alone in the privacy of his room and able even to switch off was anathema to this theory.”² In the first half of the 1950s in East and Central Europe, governments and local party bosses aimed at preventing private, solitary listening, and organized instead communal, compulsory listening events at work-places, before, after, and even during working hours, in order to prevent even half-overheard critical remarks, to provide opportunities for trained expert agitators to interpret the official voice of the regime. The public loudspeaker was a familiar object in the streets and squares, not only in small villages but even in Budapest. The well-

known photographs of large crowds, gathered around public loudspeakers in 1953 in Budapest, listening to the broadcast of the historic victory of the Hungarian soccer team over England at Wembley Stadium, testifies to this wide-spread practice.

A few years later, however, Marshall McLuhan in his *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* recognized that “Radio affects most people intimately, person-to-person, offering a world of unspoken communication between writer-speaker and the listener... That is the immediate aspect of radio. A private experience.”³ The voice coming from the air, entering the solitude of the silent room, well before the beginnings of the television programs had peculiar and dangerous effects on the listener: “It is very far from the material world, so one does not apply material standards to it. The eye alone gives a very complete picture of the world, but the ear alone gives an incomplete one. So at first it is a great temptation for the listener to ‘supplement’ the broadcast from his own imagination, to add what is so obviously lacking in the broadcast”.⁴

Radio stimulates fantasy; it feeds hope.

To measure the impact of the private experience of listening to international broadcasts, especially before the terminal weakening of the Communist regimes, was the constant preoccupation of politicians, broadcasters and researchers as well. Leo Löwenthal, a former member of the Frankfurt School, Research Director of the Voice of America, first in his talk at the American Association for Public Opinion Research in 1951, then in a paper in the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, reflected on the methodological problems “posed by the vast populations who are politically inaccessible to systematic polling.”⁵ To overcome the barrier of the Iron Curtain, analysts, pollsters and researchers had to rely mostly on interviews conducted with recent immigrants, unsuspecting tourists, volunteer helpers, and undercover agents. In order “to

obtain accurate information about large populations without systematic use of the populations themselves”⁶, analysts at the Office of International Broadcasting used two methods as compensatory approximations in the absence of more reliable techniques: the so-called “most like” approach, which “consists of using respondents who, while not actually members of the inaccessible group are of all available people ‘most like’ the subject group [this was the method used in interviewing refugees]...to obtain information about groups behind the Iron Curtain; ...and the ‘qualified judge’ approach [in the course of which] a person believed to know the group in question is asked to make certain estimates about the inaccessible group”.⁷

Probably the most ambitious use of both the “most like” and the “qualified judge” indirect approaches was the analysis of several hundred interviews conducted in 1951-52 with Polish, Czechoslovak and Hungarian refugees. The unclassified version of the study, written by Siegfried Kracauer, one of the most important twentieth century theorists of visual culture, photography and German cinema, and Paul L Berkman, was then published by the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University.⁸

Kracauer and Berkman tried to overcome the limitations of the existing literature on “Satellite mentality”, which either reflected on the general situation, the system itself or, based on subjective eye-witness report, with its “foreshortenings, super-impositions and omissions, on life within the system”, leaving the comprehensive characteristics of the system itself out of the picture. By focusing on the inconsistencies of the answers, on the slips of the tongue, reading in-between the lines of the interviews, the analysts attempted to outweigh the inherent biases of the interviewees. (In most cases the tourists and especially the recent emigrants – waiting for their residency permits – tried to please the interviewer and said what was – according to their

anticipation – supposed to be expected of them. The interviews made with recent émigrés reveal, primarily, the notions the East Europeans from behind the Iron Curtain had about the supposed image of Communism in the West. It is also apparent, both from the hundreds of interviews Karacauer and Berkman analyzed and also from the “information items” in the Open Society Archives, originally from the archives of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the remnants of a collection of thousands of interviews with East Europeans, that the overwhelming majority of the interviewees had been, at least sporadically, listeners of RFE/RL. Their views about the West, their circular presuppositions about the Western image of Communism, - especially in the case of the Soviet émigrés - had typically been formed by listening to the programs of the Radios. The Soviet Area Audience and Opinion Research Department of Radio Liberty periodically conducted systematic research on reactions to broadcast. In turn, the programmers at the Radios made use of the interviews when broadcasting anti-Communist propaganda to the East. The stories which were told in reply to the sometimes suggestive questions of the interviewers – who had good reasons to presuppose the anti-Communist leaning of the refugees, testified to the effectiveness of self-fulfilling prophecies of Western broadcasts based on the information distilled from the severely biased “information items”).⁹

Subsequent studies have tried to test and make use of both the “most like” and the “informed judge” approaches, and came to the half-tested conclusion that “it can be assumed with some confidence that the opinions of recent refugees...are not greatly different from the opinions of the home populations if we except from the latter the Communist minority...There is little ground left for doubt that these respondents, even allowing for some bias in their statements, are essentially reliable and valuable indicators of certain areas of opinion of their parent

populations.”¹⁰

The interviews, the opinion- and audience researchers, and analysts focused primarily on the private listener in his (the overwhelming majority of the refugees were young, single males) private – mostly not-owned but sublet, shared, communal – and crowded - home environment, listening secretly, mostly in the evening hours,¹¹ to the voice of the Free World, be it the Voice of America, the Voice of Free Hungary, the Hungarian broadcast of the Israeli Radio, the Vatican, Monte Carlo, Radio Tirana, or whatever. The researchers concentrated on the solitary listener, who was worried, with very good reason, when the voice from the radio – the only secret connection to the world beyond the Iron Curtain – loudly announced more than once every hour: “This is Radio Free Europe on the 16th, 19th, 25th, 31st, 41st, and 49th short-wave bands”. This was the moment when the listener, in horror, was almost convinced that he had been uncovered: the eavesdropping co-tenant in the shared bathroom of the communal apartment had certainly overheard the call-sign of the enemy radio station from the adjacent room. Judging from the “information items” collection, quite a few interviewees complained about indiscreet and loud announcements on the Radios, which were unusually audible despite the constant noise and jamming.

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Early communication theory considered noise the antithesis of message; the source of the difference between the transmitted and the received signal. Jacques Attali, novelist, presidential advisor, public intellectual, and the first CEO of the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development, however, building on more sophisticated concepts, came up with a different notion: “A network can be destroyed by noises that attack and transform it, if the codes of the

place are unable to normalize and repress them. ... Although the new order is not contained in the structure of the old, it is nonetheless not a product of chance. It is created by the substitution of new differences for the old differences. Noise is the source of these mutations to the structuring codes. For despite the death it contains, noise carries order within itself; it carries new information. This may seem strange. But noise does in fact create meaning: first, because the interruption of a message signifies the interdiction of rarity; and second, because the very absence of meaning in pure noise or in the meaningless repetition of a message, by unchanneling auditory sensations, frees the listener's imagination."¹²

Noise – as John Cage proved in his works, especially in his composition *Imaginary Landscape No.4* of 1953, which used radios as noise generators – is not simply the antithesis of meaning. To consider noise just as a natural atmospheric phenomenon would lead to dangerously oversimplified reductionism. Noise can be used as the medium of intentional message, and this is what Cage and the East European jammers managed to demonstrate.

The sound that the East European jammers generated did not simply aim at making the enemy broadcasts inaudible; the noise also established and confirmed the presence of the Communist authorities in the air, and thus in the private sphere of the secret listener. The interviewees do not leave the jamming unmentioned: they return to it, sometimes several times in the course of one single interview, as if they had tried to decipher, retrospectively, the exact meaning of the noise even to themselves. The noise generated by Soviet noise generators did not just overwrite the message coming from the West but constantly reminded the listener of the continuous surveillance, of the fact that he was not alone even behind the closed doors of his apartment. Jamming meant negating the possibility of privacy, and aimed at establishing the appearance of

the omnipresence of the Communist authorities: “The absence of meaning is in this case the presence of all meanings...The presence of noise makes sense, makes meaning. It makes possible the creation of a new order on another level of organization or a new code in another network”.¹³ Listening to the barely audible broadcast behind the noise, the listeners could see themselves as resistors, who manage to outfox the earsplitting but impotent authority.

When on 24 October, 1956, on the second day of the revolution, Gusztáv Gogolyák, head of “Post Office No. 118.”, the covert site of the technical headquarters of the jamming operation in Budapest, ordered the radio technicians all over the country to immediately close down all the facilities, shred the documents, and lock the doors of the jamming stations, surprised listeners were able for the first time to listen to the voice coming from Munich without to the signal of the presence of the Communist authorities.¹⁴ The lack of intentionally generated noise in itself amounted to a clear statement: “we are here, and they have gone”. In this unforeseen moment the (lack of) noise was the immediately decipherable message, as unconditional promise. The disappearance of the noise of jamming was probably one of the most reassuring radio propaganda tools: there was no real need for other promises to convince the inhabitants of the country that help was on the way; the audible voice was already in the living rooms, and through the open windows, in the streets as well. It was difficult to imagine that western soldiers would not soon follow.

But they did not. When after the defeat of the 1956 revolution, in the Spring of 1957 the ominous noise reentered the dilapidated apartments, it announced the return, the restoration and consolidation of the post-revolutionary Communist regime. On 1 May 1957, barely six months after the defeat of the revolution, János Kádár waved to the marching two-hundred-thousand-

strong crowd from the tribune built on the site of the former Stalin monument. The noise became once more the message: Communism was here to stay, the agreement that had allegedly been made in Yalta, had to be taken deadly seriously. It was sensible to comply.

Jamming continued until 1964, and was briefly resurrected after the invasion of Czechoslovakia on 21 August, 1968. As a result of the success of social conditioning, when jamming was replaced by undirected atmospheric noise after 1972, listeners continued to attribute the poor quality of reception to the deliberate countermeasures of the Communist jammers. It was hard to believe that the authorities were not responsible for all the noise coming from the ionosphere.

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The western analysts were primarily interested in the effect of the broadcast on the target audience, narrowly defined as the groups of listeners and their relatives, friends, colleagues, and close acquaintances, who might be indirectly influenced through communication with the listeners. Besides these groups there was another, numerically modest, but politically very important, cluster of people, who were not able to ignore the impact of the enemy broadcasts. The public opinion experts rarely ventured to investigate these individuals, despite the fact that they were regularly exposed to the programs of Radio Free Europe.

MTI, The Hungarian News Agency, was already making use of the information acquired from foreign radio programs during World War II. The News Agency monitored the Hungarian, and even the Rumanian language broadcasts of the BBC (which started immediately after the beginning of the war, in the fall of 1939) and the programs of Radio Moscow. After the war the monitoring activities were extended to the Voice of America, Deutsche Welle, Radio Ankara,

Vatican Radio, the English language broadcasts of the BBC, on so on. After 1953 monitoring took place in the building of the new headquarters of the News Agency, but in 1959 the monitoring department moved to Gödöllő, just outside Budapest. Here reception was ten times better than in the center of the city, where besides constant jamming, the equipment used at the Photo Agency of MTI also contributed to interference. The monitoring activities continued right up to 29 June 1995, until the day when, according to the last monitoring report “Pope John Paul II conducted mass together with the Patriarch of the Greek-Catholic Church in Rome”.

The secret monitoring service, which reported to a special department of the News Agency under the control of the Ministry of Interior, transcribed the recorded programs and between 1951-1989 produced summary transcripts of the RFE Hungarian language broadcasts for the so called “daily confidential information bulletin”, distributed among the select members of the highest leadership of the party. Between 1981 and 1991, besides the programs of RFE, the daily confidential bulletin included selected material from the programs of Voice of America, the BBC, Deutschlandfunk, Deutsche Welle, Radio Beijing, Radio Vatican and Israeli Radio.¹⁵ Each issue contains about 30-40 mimeographed pages, half of which are usually verbatim transcripts of RFE programs.

According to the directives, the technical personnel working at the monitoring station had to transcribe the recorded program word by word, without corrections, without adding or deleting anything from the recorded text. Until the beginning of the 1980s the transcripts were not edited; the Foreign Policy Desk, which was nominally in charge of publishing the daily bulletin, hired an editor to take charge of the transcripts only at the beginning of the decade. The transcripts show the signs of difficulties of comprehension, the distorting effects of jamming and

atmospheric noise, and the spelling problems of the transcribers. Even obvious misunderstandings and misspellings had to be kept in the final text; sometimes only a (sic!) mark referred to an obvious distortion in the edited bulletin, unaccompanied by remarks, commentaries, or interpretations. We might safely conclude that the monitoring apparatus was instructed to transmit the verbatim text of the daily broadcasts directly to the political leadership.

The technical staff was directed to pay special attention to the following programs:

1. Hungarian domestic issues and their foreign reception;
2. The activities of the opposition and the churches;
3. Interviews with and statements by the representatives of Hungarian emigration;
4. The life of the Hungarian minority in the neighboring countries;
5. International news and commentaries relating to Hungary (in the spheres of the economy, social policy, international statistics),
6. Reflexions on the publications of the Hungarian press (domestic issues, the economy, the activities of the government and the parliament, statements by Hungarian political leaders);
7. Opinion of foreign experts about the most important issues of Hungarian political and economic life;
8. The role of Hungarian-born businessmen;
9. Comparative international information programs, talkshows;

10. Presentation of Hungarian firms, companies, and economic actors.¹⁶

The list was extensive and covered wide areas of contemporary political, social and economic life. Until the early 1980s the transcribers were instructed not to include texts about the private or even the public life of either Hungarian or other Communist leaders. It was explicitly forbidden to include texts, - even in the strictly confidential internal bulletins – which dealt with the problems of succession in Communist countries. According to the internal instructions, certain types of text had to be transcribed in full. These included manifestos and open letters by opposition groups, émigrés and civil organizations, sent to RFE or to the BBC.

At the moment, the text of one whole decade, the years from 1972 to 1981, cannot be found in the archives of the MTI. Still, even without the lost decade we have well over fifty thousand (!) mimeographed pages of the daily news-bulletin; more than thirty thousand pages alone of full-text transcripts of RFE programs. It is definitely not an overstatement to say that the Communist party leadership was far better informed about the programs of RFE than the most devoted subversive, anti-Communist private listener.

Besides the “strictly confidential” mimeographed daily news-bulletin, the special section of the Hungarian News Agency internally published other regular, confidential information-bulletins about the programs of the foreign radio stations: “Appendix to the daily news-bulletin”, “RFE-Western radio stations weekly-bulletin”, “Weekly bulletin about the Hungarian language programs of the Western radio stations”, “Addendum to the Weekly bulletin about the Hungarian language programs of the Western radio stations”, Military bulletin – Hungarian language programs of Western radio stations”, “Special editions”, and “Expert editions”.

Departments of the Central Committee, ministries and the Information Office of the Council of Ministers had the right to order special monitoring services. The Information Office regularly ordered transcripts of Hungarian news-survey programs of the Western radios, while the Ministry of the Interior acquired the full text of all programs which were based on the letters or messages sent by Hungarian listeners. (In this way the Ministry tried to follow the changes of the mood of the population as they were represented in correspondence with the western stations, in order to complement the heavily biased internal population attitude polls and the reports of party functionaries and professional and so-called "informal" secret agents.) The Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Defense Committee of the Council of Ministers, were all entitled to give special assignments to the monitoring section and to order specialized thematic bulletins.¹⁷

The list of those members of the nomenclature who were to receive the confidential bulletins was kept in a safe in the headquarters of the MTI. After the political transition the list was allegedly lost, but according to former employees of the News Agency, while at the beginning only a few dozen functionaries were on the list, later on the mimeographed daily news-bulletin was internally published in between 150 and 300 copies, while the weekly editions reached a much wider audience.¹⁸ These are not insignificant numbers: it is safe to state that the wider leadership of the Hungarian party received regular, almost objective information about all the politically significant programs of RFE; the information was not intentionally distorted, was not commented upon, and the most important issues were covered extensively, with full-text versions of the transcripts.

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On 24 March, 1969 the Politburo of the Hungarian party decided to set up a “Foreign Propaganda Sub-Department” inside the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee. The Sub-Department was instructed to monitor and regularly evaluate the “enemy propaganda directed against our People’s Democracy” and to set up an “evaluating committee” with representatives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defense and the Interior, as well as delegates from the Institute of Cultural Relations (an important intelligence cover organization), the Hungarian News Agency and the Hungarian Radio. The committee had to prepare quarterly reports about the recent tendencies of “enemy propaganda”. The first report covered the third quarter of 1969. The reports were sent to the members of the Politburo, the Secretariat, to the Department Heads of the Central Committee and to a few other high-ranking officials, whose work was specifically related to either international or domestic propaganda. and counter-propaganda. According to a memorandum sent by the then head of the Agitation and Propaganda Department to János Kádár, First Secretary of the party, the work of the evaluation committee was not exceptional in the socialist countries, and the party leaderships of the GDR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union had suggested to the Hungarian Central Committee that they share experiences and exchange the evaluation reports. (In the spirit of mutual distrust, the Secretariat decided in the end to share the information only with the specialized agencies of the Soviet Union.)¹⁹

Following the decision of the Politburo, from the third quarter of 1969 onwards, the evaluation committee started producing and distributing its reports, thus supplementing the copious information already available about enemy radio programs. The evaluation reports quote extensively from the publications of the western press, from the programs of the “enemy radio

stations”, referring verbatim to the propaganda materials of western organizations. They employ only the minimal necessary markers to distance the stand of the evaluators from the views of the western media: they use quotation marks when referring to the “evaluation” and the “analysis” of the western “experts” and “specialists”; when quoting from the western media, the evaluators preface quotations with expressions such as: “falsifying the actual situation, western analysts state...”, or “misinterpreting recent developments, they claim...”, or “allegedly focusing on...”, or “creating the illusion...”. The Communist counter-propagandists refer to “the center of imperialist propaganda machinery”, to “those who are interested in the loosening of control over the society”; to those, who use “objectivity” (in between quotation marks), who are careful to convey the “appearance of objectivity”, who talk or write “objectively”. In the vocabulary of counter-propaganda the adjective, “objective” slowly became one of the most important negative characteristics of the western media, a sort of Wagnerian leitmotiv.

Still, compared to the transcripts of the programs, there were very important differences. The transcripts were verbatim full texts of broadcasts; the technical personnel had nothing to do with the content, they did not become involved in any possible way. The evaluation reports, however, were no longer impersonal: the members of the committee were known; the head or the deputy of the Agitation and Propaganda Department signed the report. (After 1973 the hard-liner Károly Grósz, Deputy Head of the Department, later on the last Secretary General of the Hungarian Party, put his signature on the submitted documents.) Judged on the basis of both the style and even the content of the reports, these texts were more personal than the program transcripts. The tone of the reports was not very far from the voice of an attentive, cautious, somewhat uneasy observer. It is not an unfounded claim that, in a certain way, the evaluators, and to a certain

extent even the readers of the reports, interiorized, in somewhat perverted way, the perspective and the actual content of the narrative.

The evaluators no longer claimed that the other side aimed at overthrowing the Communist regime; they usually used the expression "their aim was to loosen up the control of the regime over society". Reading the report it is obvious that by the end of the 1960s the Communist experts had become convinced that the Western propagandists were not in the business of inciting a rebellion. On the contrary, those were the times of uncomfortable, involuntary – if not peaceful, at least inevitable - coexistence between the two sides of the Cold War.

The end of the 1960s significantly differed from the previous decade, especially from the voice of pre-1956 times, when, according to the "information items" and to the Kracauer-Berkman book, the most popular RFE program was the so-called "Black Book", which exposed and named especially cruel Communist functionaries and petty officials at specific institutions, factories, firms and localities, thus creating the impression that the Radios were actually there, in the vicinity, inside the workplace, ready to uncover those who were responsible for the daily suffering of the local community. (Besides the "Black Book", according to the interviews, the other highly popular program was the regular broadcast of gypsy music – unauthentic, urbanized fake folk music – the favorite of the déclassé middle class.) The "Black Book" program was based on the supposed quick collapse of the regime, after which those who had been named and singled out as responsible for the cruel repression would be dully punished. Before 1956 the time horizon was limited: the period was still considered to be transitory. Former aristocrats turned cab drivers were still addressed by the concierge of the nationalized apartment building as if they had managed to keep their former title and social status.

The 1956 revolution, or its defeat – when the discrepancy between the “liberation theory” or the liberation rhetoric of the American administration and cruel reality became evident – in a strange and paradoxical way contributed to the world-wide stability of the divided world. The launch of the Sputnik signaled the end of the period of transition and the arrival of involuntary détente. Both sides gave up their hopes of imminent victory, and tried to readjust to hopeless long-term coexistence.

The reports of the evaluation committee are characteristic traces of this period. It would be highly instructive to conduct a serious, laborious philological analysis and compare the language, the vocabulary, and the career of certain formulae in the course of the East-West dialogue on the air. Communism or its representation was a joint construct: the result of a not-so-obvious but permanent dialogue between the strategists on the two sides. RFE monitored, recorded, and transcribed the broadcasts of the official East and Central European radio stations. The summary transcripts (which are strikingly similar to the Hungarian mimeographed daily news-bulletins, and which are stored in the Open Society Archives in Budapest) with short English summaries, together with so called “situation reports” and background papers were sent as telegrams to Washington, where in the morning when the officials arrived at their offices in the State Department and in other specialized agencies, they found the daily transcripts on their desks. Responses were sent to the Political Analyst Department and to the programs of the Radios with instructions about how to respond to the Communist propaganda. And as we already know, in Budapest and in Gödöllő, in all the East European capitals, monitors and technical staff were busy listening, jamming, recording and transcribing verbatim the enemy radio broadcasts and sending daily bulletins to the select group of addressees at the Agitation and Propaganda

Department of the Central Committee, at the Ministry of the Interior and at other covert or even not-so-covert agencies, which had to right to instruct the national radios about how to counter the “enemy propaganda”. The evaluation team regularly analyzed the tone and content of the RFE programs and submitted suggestions to the Secretariat and the Politburo, about how to instruct the media, especially the national radio service in the foreseeable future. What the unsuspecting listener heard in the solitude of his small room, while listening either to the national radio or secretly to the RFE programs was just one single voice, one side of this ongoing dialogue above his head between the programmers, the political strategists, the public opinion experts on the two sides.

Instead of a deep philological analysis I will present only a seemingly not-very-significant, almost randomly selected example from the history of this joint effort. I will use the first, hitherto unanalyzed evaluation reports.

The so-called “New Economic Mechanism” was introduced in Hungary at the beginning of 1968. The work on the reform package, which aimed at “stimulating” the market, with limited market incentives, a limited role for supply and demand, very limited autonomy on the micro levels of the economy, limited self-constraint of the central planning organs, a limited role for private initiative, especially in agriculture, etc. started in the middle of the 1960s, at the time when some of the other socialist countries, among them the GDR, Poland, Czechoslovakia and even the Soviet Union, embarked on the introduction of limited reforms, strictly in the sphere of the economy. By the time the reform, by far the most ambitious economic reform package in Eastern Europe, was introduced in Hungary, the international conditions had worsened considerably, the atmosphere had become unfavorable to the reform, and after the invasion of

Czechoslovakia, it became evident that Moscow was openly against the continuation of dubious economic experiments with uncertain outcomes. The Hungarian leadership severely restricted the range of the reform without admitting, however, that it had had to give up the planned changes, which were publicly marketed as important contributions to the standard of living and the development of both the socialist economic theory and practice. The first reports of the evaluation committee dealt extensively with Western, especially RFE, reactions to this situation.

The first report, which covers the third quarter of 1969 states the “the New Economic Mechanism is in the focus of the imperialist propaganda. The Western propaganda agencies present themselves as true and ‘consistent defenders of the reform’ in opposition to the party and the socialist state, which do not have the courage needed to carry through the reform’...According to Western radio commentators ‘responsibility for the inconsequential implementation of the basically progressive reform rests with the leadership of the party, which willingly or unwillingly subordinates Hungarian national interests to the orders of Moscow, and by serving the interests of the Soviet conservatives – independent of the true intentions of the Hungarian leadership – endangers the success of the reform.”²⁰...On the first anniversary of the coordinated action of the five countries in Czechoslovakia [they do not have the courage even in a strictly confidential document to name the obvious] western propaganda emphasizes the fact that, although not voluntarily, but under Soviet pressure, Hungary played an indecent role in the aggression against the independence and sovereignty of the Czechoslovak people.”²¹

The report from the fourth quarter of 1969 mentioned that western radios emphasized “the growing tension between the ‘more flexible’ Hungarian economic mechanism and the ‘bureaucratic, inflexible centralism’ of the COMECON...Moscow tries hard to make Hungary

more and more dependent on her...Hungary is prevented from making use of the opportunities created by available western loans...it is due to the dictates of Moscow that the Hungarian party has to subordinate genuine national interests to the needs of ‘internationalism’.”²²

“The propagandists of the imperialists, among them RFE, try to prove the intimate and inevitable connection between the probable outcome of the fight between ‘neo-Stalinist anti-reformers and genuine reformers in the Soviet Union’ on the fate of the Hungarian reform. The Western observers argue that the outcome of the reform efforts is primarily due to international, and not so much to domestic factors.”²³ “ ‘Analyzing’ the internal situation of our country it is remarkable that RFE misconstrues the relationship between the party and the people. It claims that there is an implicit deal between the Hungarian leadership and the people. The government lets the people live, as much as possible, quietly, as they wish. The people, on the other hand, let the Communist govern quietly. Both parties know what the other might be able to do in a serious situation. The Western propaganda presents ‘the policy of small steps at a time’ as a Hungarian specialty, and claims that what the Hungarian party leadership is trying to accomplish in a covert way, is basically the same as what Czechoslovakia tried to do in 1968.”²⁴

According to the dubious view of the evaluation experts there was – allegedly – a remarkable difference between the way the Hungarian reforms were presented to the Western public on the one hand and to the Hungarian audience on the other: “Whereas the reports targeted at the Western public emphasized – ‘in a tendentious way’ – the remarkable results of the reforms, the ‘daring’ and ‘bold’ efforts, ‘the outstanding social, political and economic achievements’, the programs aimed at the Hungarian audience (especially the programs of Radio Free Europe) chastise the inconsistencies of the reform policy, urge the speeding up of the reforms, and list all

the unfulfilled promises.”²⁵ The counter-propagandists’ narratives describe the alleged opposition between the “suspicious arch-conservatism” of the Soviets and the “liberalism of the Hungarian leadership”, the fact that the Western media tries to make the precarious Hungarian situation even more difficult to manage.

The second quarterly report in 1970 drew attention to some new developments in the western propaganda. The western media “present Hungary as the possible model for the other socialist countries; the propagandists highlight the emerging capitalist elements in our economy... they consider the economic reform as a new opening to the West... they talk about ‘the so-called Hungarian model’ ...”²⁶ “The western radio broadcasts hold the Soviet Union responsible for the problems of the Hungarian economy.”²⁷

“A new voice is emerging in the West” – claims one of the reports dated 26 October 1970. “If the West showed too much enthusiasm for the ‘*silent revolution of Hungary*’ this might lead to a clash with the Soviet Union. The Western analysts call for self-restraint when commenting on the Hungarian reforms, for too much wind” – as *Die Presse* put it – has always turned East European spring-awakenings into icy Siberian winters.”²⁸

As these short, randomly selected excerpts prove, this is a highly unusual material. My question at this point is not whether we are able to recognize the voice of RFE behind these descriptions, whether the texts are faithful representations of the RFE programs (most probably they are not quite); but what the function and the impact of these curious interpretations of alleged reports of the Western media was on Hungary.

Most probably there were obvious discrepancies and visible contradictions between the verbatim

transcripts of the “daily news-bulletin” and the tendentious quotes of the evaluation reports. However, it was not in the interests of the carefully selected group of party leaders to point at the incongruities. They got what they had been hoping for: the distorted and misinterpreted texts of the Western propaganda provided a strange legitimacy and supplied important additional arguments for their unprincipled compromises and faint-hearted retreat. I want to make a strong claim: in my view, it was with the help of the interpretation of the evaluation experts that the Hungarian party leadership discovered the essence of the economic reforms and sold the compromised half-measures as genuine changes both to the population and to themselves. The evaluators, with the implicit consent of the leadership, provided the alleged approval of the western media, that helped in the self-deception of the party leadership. Officially sanctioned self-deception, in turn, was the precondition of deceiving the population.

The socialist economy may be easily imagined in the same terms that the French philosopher Michel Foucault described the modern prison system. Prison, according to Foucault, is not a passive institution shaken periodically by various movements for reform, but is the natural sphere of constant intervention. Prison reform is contemporary with the prison institution; constant reform is a constituent element of the institution. The necessity for reform is not simply the result of criticism of the system: to some extent the constant change adapts the prison to its purposes. The task of the institution is to correct, and the prison system can achieve this only if it undertakes constant self-correction (the direction of which is also constantly changing).²⁹ The new mechanism introduced in 1968 is the classic example of exercise of power with the help of ambiguity. The system, which its critics described as neither plan nor market, and referred to as the negative essence of the reform, was regarded by the political leadership as a positive

characteristic of the system. It was both what it had been and what it had become, something that contained its own inbuilt contradiction, and which, as a result, could no longer be openly defined. Those who demanded a market were given a piece of that, those who feared that capitalism was creeping back in could be reassured, those who wanted things to remain as they were need not be disappointed, those who were anxious for change found something to feed their hopes. The perpetually changing regulations made it clear that there was nothing that could not be revoked or reversed, a decision did not imply that other possibilities were decisively excluded.

The possibility of perpetual alterations encouraged the perpetual hope of change. Even after the reforms had run aground – in the first half of 1968, immediately after the introduction of the first reform measures – it was still possible to keep hoping that alterations would – one fine day – mean change. The alterations institutionalized ambiguity, uncertainty, and the institutionalized impossibility of foreknowledge. Nothing was what it purported to be, everything had become a sign of something else from which quite different conclusions could be easily drawn. The initiated claimed to discern battles between modernizers and conservatives, independents and adherents of the Soviet neo-Stalinists, between the forces of good and evil, progressives and regressives, whatever these categorized might have meant.

In the meantime reform had become completely disembodied; its condition reduced to a ghostly state in which its own anti-thesis had become an element of its existence. The leadership was in need of support from the West, the help coming from (interpreters and evaluators of) the Western propaganda. They needed to show themselves up as martyrs of progression, who try the impossible in the face of the constant pressure coming from the inflexible East. They pretended that without the limits set by Moscow, Hungary, and socialism would move quicker and further

in the direction of the envisioned end of history. By making good use of the consciously misperceived Western reactions they not only presented themselves as martyrs of the (whichever) faith, but started to see themselves in this light, under this new description as well. The mask they found in-between the lines of Western propaganda, as it happened in the Japanese film, *Onibaba*, rotted into their faces, and it became impossible to distinguish between their former and new, pretended selves. Once pervasive ambiguity had penetrated every sphere of being, no-one knew who was doing the manipulating and who was being manipulated: they couldn't even remember what it was all in aid of.

After the changes of 1989 the former Communist did not forget their reading of the Western media. They recalled the alleged praise of the western enemy media, and remembered their alleged heroic efforts, as they had read about them back at the end of the 1960 and the beginning of the 1970s in the Western press through the distorting optics of the reports of the evaluation committee. Ever since after the *Soviet* defeat of the 1956 revolution (and nowadays this is the way history is recalled: it was the Soviets, and the Soviets alone who defeated the 1956 revolution) they have tried hard to introduce the demands of the revolution “in the Hungarian way”, deceiving the Soviets, one small step at a time, despite the dangers and the Soviet pressures. They did – but in smarter way – exactly what Dubcek tried in vain to do in Czechoslovakia, and they were those who by the help of their “silent revolution” managed to transform their own system into a Western type market-based modern democracy. The transition of 1989 was the final victory of their long, smart, silent work. The insiders, the party reformers led the country out of Communism, to the rule of law, parliamentary democracy, to the economy coordinated by the invisible hand of the market. The new economic mechanism – in an invisible

way – aimed at achieving exactly this final secret aim.

At the hearing in the European Parliament, László Kovács, , foreign minister of post-communist Hungary, one of the candidates to the post of Commissioner of the European Union was asked about the role he played in post-1956 Hungary. The former deputy head of the Foreign Policy Department of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Communist party answered without hesitation: According to his recollection, what he had done was nothing else but to work on Hungary's return to the European community. The road to NATO led via the Warsaw Pact; to the European Union via the COMECON, to the post of the Commissioner via amnesia and self-deception.

* Paper prepared for the “Cold War Broadcasting Impact Conference”, Stanford, 13-16 October, 2004

¹ London, The Athlone Press, 1970

² *ibid.* p. 4.

³ New York, Mentor, 1964 p. 261.

⁴ Rudolf Arnheim, *In Praise of Blindness*, reprinted in Neil Strauss (ed.), *Raditext(e), Semiotext(e)* #16 (Volume Vi, Issue 1. New York, 1993. p. 20. Originally published in 1936. Quoted by Thomas Bass, *Balloons and Broadcasts: Infiltrating the Internationalist Barrier Dividing East from West. A Study in Metaphors.* (mimeo, 1996) pp. 15-16.

⁵ Joseph T. Klapper, Leo Lowenthal, *The Contribution of Opinion Research to the Evaluation of Psychological Warfare.* The Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 15. No. 4. (Winter, 1951-1952) p. 657.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 659.

⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 659-660.

⁸ *Satellite Mentality. Political Attitudes and Propaganda, Susceptibilities of Non-Communists in Hungary, Poland,*

and Czechoslovakia. New York, F. A. Praeger, 1956.

⁹ “Even under the most favorable interview circumstances, it is argued, the escapees will try, consciously or not, to present the situation back home in a way which justifies their defection and conforms to what they believe Western investigators want to hear. ..Of course, care has been taken to trace such misrepresentation as do occur. (sic) One of the methods employed to this end...capitalizes on the fact that numerous escapees get entangled in contradictions without their being aware of it...And since such slips as a rule reveal what a person really thinks, one is safe in assuming that notwithstanding their allegations to the contrary, these respondents did expose themselves to the flow of domestic communications and could not help being influenced by them. It might be added that the book [*Satellite Mentality*] draws heavily on unguarded remarks, in particular those which are at variance with what the respondent under consideration volunteers within other contexts.” Ibid. pp. 6-7.

Cf.: also Siegfried Kracauer, *The Challenge of Qualitative Analysis*, In: *The Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 16. No. 4, Special Issue on International Communications Research (Winter, 1952-1953) pp. 631-642.

¹⁰ Richard C. Sheldon and John Dutkowski, *Are Soviet Satellite Refugee Interviews Projectable?* In: *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, pp. 593-594.

¹¹ “The timing of the broadcasts is also important, because the twilight hours of morning and evening are the most ineffective of Soviet-originated sky-wave jamming. This is because the western broadcasts can take advantage of the ionosphere’s ‘solid’ condition at these times, while the eastern jamming broadcasts have difficulty in achieving a reasonable reflection in their ‘broken’ section of the ionosphere. This creates a time-related gap in the Soviet defenses.” K.R.M. Short, *The Real Masters of the Black Heavens*. In: Short (ed.), *Western Broadcasts over the Iron Curtain*. London, Croom Helm, 1986. p. 6.

¹² *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1985. p. 33. Quoted by Thomas Bass, op. cit. p. 38.

¹³ Attali, op. cit. p. 33. Quoted by Thomas Bass, op. cit. pp. 38-39.

¹⁴ Béla Révész’ Interview with Gusztáv Gogolyák on 26 March, 1996.

¹⁵ Márta Szomor, *Rádiófigyelés és Kiadványai az MTI-ben* (Radio monitoring and its publications at the MTI). Budapest, mimeo, July, 2004.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 5.

¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 5-6.

¹⁸ Personal communication of Mátyás Vince, President of MTI.

¹⁹ Memo to Comrade János Kádár from Sándor Jakab, head of the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the HSWP. 8 December, 1969.

²⁰ MOL (Hungarian National Archives) MDP/MSZMP dept. 288 5/505 *. e. pp. 1-2. (References refer to the old fond and serial numbers, before the party documents became consolidated into the general holdings of the Hungarian National Archives.)

²¹ ibid. p. 4.

²² MOL. 288. 11/2873. ő. e. pp. 3-4.

²³ MOL. 288. 11/2941. ő. e. p. 2.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 3. (emphases added)

²⁵ Ibid. p. 3.

²⁶ MOL. 288. 11/2994. ő. e. pp. 1-2.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 5.

²⁸ MOL. 288. 11/2994 ő. e. p. 4.

²⁹ Cf. *Discipline and Punish*. New York, Vintage, 1979. pp. 234-235.