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**Socialism Remembered: Cultural Nostalgia, Retro, and the Politics of the Past
in the Czech Republic, 1989-2014**

UCL

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I, Veronika Pehe, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This thesis explores the political dimensions of representing history through literature, film, and television, offering a wide-ranging analysis of the cultural responses to the period of state socialism in the Czech Republic after the collapse of the former Eastern Bloc. Unlike in Germany, where the memory of the period from the end of the Second World War to the fall of the Berlin Wall has largely been discussed in terms of nostalgia, in the Czech case there is little evidence for nostalgia for either the utopian impulse of the socialist project or its everyday aspects. This research thus challenges nostalgia as one of the main paradigms for the remembrance of the socialist period in the former Eastern Bloc and demonstrates that in the Czech context, an aesthetic fascination with the past is not at odds with, but in fact reinforces an anti-communist rejection of the politics of socialism.

My contention is that the object of remembrance in cultural production in the Czech Republic is not the period of state socialism itself, but rather a narrative of its overcoming through resistance and heroism. The retrospective handling of the past through cultural texts and practices hinges on a narrative of progress from the period of socialism to liberal democracy, which ultimately serves to legitimate the present political order. To capture this dynamic, I propose a new definition of “retro” as a relationship to the past devoid of emotional longing, which is predicated on a position of superiority to the past while enabling a vicarious enjoyment of its aesthetics.

The project’s wider relevance beyond its immediate regional context is a contribution to the understanding of how popular culture and its circulation in the public sphere acts as one of the major structuring forces of collective memory and uncovers the different political agendas to which this memory is harnessed. Combining approaches from literary and film studies with historical and sociological investigation, and close readings of representations with a discourse analysis of public debates, this thesis presents a cultural history of the Czech post-socialist relationship to the socialist past.

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Abbreviations

ČSSD	<i>Česká strana sociálně demokratická</i>	Czech Social Democratic Party
KPV	<i>Konfederace politických vězňů</i>	Confederation of Political Prisoners
KSČ	<i>Komunistická strana Československa</i>	Communist Party of Czechoslovakia
KSČM	<i>Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy</i>	Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia
ODS	<i>Občanská demokratická strana</i>	Civic Democratic Party
OF	<i>Občanské fórum</i>	Civic Forum
OH	<i>Občanské hnutí</i>	Civic Movement
StB	<i>Státní bezpečnost</i>	State Security
ÚDV	<i>Úřad dokumentace a vyšetřování zločinů komunismu</i>	Office for the Documentation and Investigation of the Crimes of Communism
ÚSD	<i>Ústav pro soudobé dějiny Akademie věd České republiky</i>	Institute for Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences
ÚSTR	<i>Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů</i>	Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes

Chapter 1. Introduction: returning to the past



Figure 1. The door of Café Kaaba, Prague. Photo by Prokop Jelínek.

On a tree-lined street in Prague's upmarket district of Vinohrady, Café Kaaba invites customers to drink a coffee in an interior decorated in 'Brussels Style', the late 1950s and early 1960s wave of design that followed the success of the Czechoslovak Pavilion at the World's Fair in Brussels in 1958.¹ Before entering, Kaaba proudly informs customers of its attitude towards the state socialist past² on its door. On a sticker with a crossed-out red circle, where one would often find the symbol of a dog to indicate that pets are not welcome, Kaaba features a crossed out sickle and hammer. A second sticker displays crossed out cherries, the symbol

¹ For more on 'Brussels Style', see Cathleen M. Giustino, 'Industrial Design and the Czechoslovak Pavilion at EXPO '58: Artistic Autonomy, Party Control and Cold War Common Ground', *Journal of Contemporary History* 47, no. 1 (2012): 185-212.

² The question of whether to refer to the period of rule by various national communist parties in Central and Eastern Europe as socialism or communism remains debated. However, it is not my wish to contribute to these debates in this thesis. In this study, for reasons of clarity and consistency, I use contemporary terminology, i.e. socialism rather than communism, as Central and Eastern European regimes used this term themselves (in the case of Czechoslovakia, the adjective *socialist* was part of its official name, *The Czechoslovak Socialist Republic*, from 1960). I add the adjective 'state' to differentiate between the historical example of socialism as practised in the former Eastern Bloc and other historical or present versions of socialism. By the same token, I refer to anti-communism rather than antisocialism, as *antikomunismus* is the term exclusively employed in Czech public debates, and the discourse is (at least nominally) aimed at the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM). I do, on the other hand, use the phrase 'communist rule' as a shorthand for the period in which the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) governed.

of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), in a clear message that communists are not allowed (Fig. 1). The socialist-era design on show in the café is to be enjoyed not for the political era that gave rise to it, but as one of the many available styles that the free market offers. Though the interior of the café is pleasant, the disclaimer on the door suggests that this should not stimulate nostalgia for how things were in the past. Instead, the message implies a hypothetical projection of the achievements of socialism – its design – without its politics: a state socialism without communists.

Such a paradoxical attitude is emblematic of the Czech relationship to state socialism evident in many post-1989 representations of the past, and also holds a firm place in public discourse. The negotiation of this relationship, like elsewhere in the former Eastern Bloc, has been one of the most pressing issues the Czech Republic had to deal with after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. Throughout the region, reckoning with the legacies of the rule of communist parties (under the guise of a variety of names) has had implications for legislation and the organization of the new political order after 1989 or 1991. Salvaging or conversely condemning aspects of the previous regime has impacted the formation of collective and national identities, and various state and non-state groups have used the past to legitimate their political aims. While many of these aspects have been addressed by political scientists, the way a society understands its own past is not a matter for politicians and legislative measures alone. It is through culture that particular narratives of the past are kept alive and help to structure understandings of the present. This thesis takes retrospective representations – literature, film, and television series – that arose after 1989 as a major component of the collective cultural memory of the state socialist period of 1948-1989 in the Czech Republic and sets them in conversation with public debates in the first twenty-five years after the demise of the previous regime.

In other countries of the former Eastern Bloc, in particular Germany, nostalgia has been perceived as the dominant post-socialist memory regime, describing a captivation with the aesthetics, and material and popular culture of socialism that manifests across the region in literature, film, and television, in the popularity of old brands, and various other commercial iterations, including the souvenir industry, with its various more or less ironic Lenin and Stalin mementoes. But unlike Germany, I argue that in the Czech case, there is little evidence for

nostalgia for both the utopian impulse behind the socialist project and its everyday aspects. Yet neither has the period necessarily been cast as trauma. Instead, what we witness is more akin to a form of amnesia: the omnipresent anti-communist narrative of the post-socialist era has rejected the past as a whole in order to divest both the population and political elites from responsibility for perpetuating or condoning the previous regime. This is particularly the case for the injustices committed in this regime's name, while the previous era's achievements are systematically ignored or rhetorically separated from their political context. It is thus my contention that the object of remembrance in the Czech context is less the period of socialism itself than a narrative of its overcoming.

At the same time, representations of the past indulge in an aesthetic fascination with the material and popular culture of the period, which is however not at odds with a dismissal of socialist politics. Rather than nostalgia, I conceptualize this relationship to the past as 'retro'. I argue that the dominant cultural narrative in the Czech Republic naturalizes socialism to posit capitalism as its only natural outcome: the retrospective handling of the socialist past through cultural texts and practices is predicated on a narrative of progress from the period of socialism to liberal democracy, which ultimately serves to legitimate the present political order.

The following thesis constitutes the first project to offer an in-depth analysis of the responses of representational culture to the period of state socialism in the Czech Republic after the collapse of the former Eastern Bloc. A whole canon of literature, film, and television production portraying the times before the 'Velvet Revolution' of 1989, as well as the continued popularity of socialist-era popular culture, have intervened in the way the period has been remembered, yet these cultural phenomena have not been studied systematically.³

³ Appraisals of cultural responses to the socialist past remain partial in the Czech Republic and have mainly been conducted through the prism of nostalgia. For example, Martin Franc has studied the popularity of socialist era brands; Andrew Roberts has addressed re-emergent socialist popular culture; and Irena Reifová is concerned with nostalgia in television. A growing literature analyses cinematic portrayals of the past, in particular the work of Kamil Činátl, Radim Hladík, and the edited collection *Film a dějiny 4: Normalizace*. See Martin Franc, 'Ostalgie v Čechách', in *Kapitoly z dějin české demokracie po roce 1989*, ed. Michal Kopeček and Adéla Gjuričová (Prague and Litomyšl: Paseka, 2008), 193-216; Martin Franc, 'Ostalgie v České republice a v SRN', in *Historická reflexe minulosti aneb 'Ostalgie' v Německu a Česku*, ed. Daniel Kunštát and Ladislav Mrklas (Prague: CEVRO Institut, 2009), 7-14; Andrew Roberts, 'The Politics and Anti-Politics of Nostalgia', *East European Politics & Societies*, 16, no. 3 (2002): 764-809; Irena Reifová, 'Kryty moci a úkryty před mocí: Normalizační a postkomunistický televizní seriál', in *Konsolidace vládnutí a podnikání v České*

Such cultural reactions to the past deserve attention because they constitute a significant structuring mechanism of the historical imagination of the period. I examine these reactions on several levels: the primary source base consists of a body of cultural production, while the second level of investigation traces the interactions of this production with wider societal debates on the socialist past. These discussions were conducted mainly in the media, and through official memory politics on the level of legislature and institutions. I analyse cultural production for common themes, values, and political meanings to examine narratives about the past, taking a cultural studies approach by understanding these narratives as further contested, negotiated, and endowed with new meanings on the level of audience reception,⁴ which becomes particularly significant in the case of post-1989 receptions of socialist-era popular culture. This thesis thus narrows its focus on cultural production as its source base, though through contextualization, these sources are employed to comment on culture in the broader sense as a domain of symbols and discourses. While my analysis aims at capturing cultural narratives that arose in the new political and social circumstances of the systemic transformation, at the same time, it also takes into account that culture industries and the inherited expectations and modes of reception of the socialist era did not disappear overnight; a consideration of cultural continuities thus also constitutes a field of exploration in this research.

The main question this thesis investigates is what kinds of political meanings are attached to cultural narratives about the socialist past. I argue that variations in these political meanings are connected to the genres through which stories about the socialist past are told. In *Metahistory*, Hayden White outlines how the same historical events recounted via different generic conventions – or in his terms, ‘modes of emplotment’ – give rise to different meanings. White notes, for

Republice a v Evropské unii II. Sociologie, prognostika a správa. Média, ed. Jakub Končelík, Barbara Köpplová, and Irena Prázová (Prague: Matfyz Press, 2002), 354-371; Irena Carpentier Reifová, Kateřina Gillarová, and Radim Hladík, ‘The Way We Applauded: How Popular Culture Stimulates Collective Memory of the Socialist Past in Czechoslovakia: The Case of the Television Serial *Vyprávěj* and its Viewers’, in *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism*, ed. Anikó Imre, Timothy Havens, and Katalin Lustyik (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2013), 199-22; Kamil Činátl, *Naše české minulosti* (Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2014); Radim Hladík, ‘Traumatické komedie: Politika paměti v českém filmu’, *Sociální studia* 1 (2010): 9-26; Petr Kopal, ed., *Film a dějiny 4: Normalizace* (Prague: Casablanca and ÚSTR, 2014).

⁴ See Stuart Hall, ‘Encoding / Decoding’, in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79*, ed. Stuart Hal et al. (London: Routledge, 2005), 117–127; see also John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

instance, that ‘if, in the course of narrating his story, the historian provides it with the plot structure of a Tragedy, he has “explained” it in one way; if he has structured it as a Comedy, he has “explained” it in another way’.⁵ While White is concerned with historiography rather than fictional representations, I adapt the basic insight that the choice of genre is a structuring factor in the interpretation of the historical events portrayed. Narrating a period such as Normalization – as the final two decades of state socialism in Czechoslovakia after the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion are generally known⁶ – as either comedy or drama generates distinct interpretations, which range from conciliatory narratives of the non-participatory experience of the ‘small person’, to commentaries on a perceived democratic national identity by casting out ‘totalitarian’ perpetrators and setting heroes as role models. Narrative modes within different genres, such as nostalgia, further interact with and complicate the political dimensions of represented history; it is by analysing this coming together of genre and narrative mode that a complex image of the political uses of the past begins to emerge.

The choice of the Czech Republic as the geographical focus of this research is significant not only because it will fill a gap in scholarly literature on post-socialist memory, but also because the Czech context appears to defy some of the established narratives within the region, in particular the nostalgia paradigm, which has been so prominent in the German case. Not only, I argue, has nostalgia been largely absent from public discourse, but also, as chapter 2 will discuss, Czechoslovakia, and later the Czech Republic, experienced one of the swiftest and seemingly most successful introductions of legislative reckonings with the legacies of communist rule in the region.⁷ Paradoxically, the continued existence of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (*Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy*;

⁵ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 7.

⁶ Normalization’ is used as the preferred designation for the last twenty years of socialism in Czechoslovakia, in keeping with efforts to apply contemporary terminology. Originally used by the invading powers to designate the desired result of the 1968 armed intervention, the term became a contemporary category used across the political spectrum. As Jonathan Bolton notes, the label was swiftly picked up by reform communists, and has been widely adopted by historians. See Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 72-74.

⁷ For more details, as well as the pitfalls of viewing the ‘exemplary Czech case’ optimistically as a success story, see Michal Kopeček, ‘In Search of “National Memory”: The Politics of History, Nostalgia and the Historiography of Communism in the Czech Republic and East Central Europe’, in *Past in the Making: Historical Revisionism in Central Europe After 1989*, ed. Michal Kopeček (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2007), 75-95.

KSČM) has only reinforced the idea of a successful transformation: unlike in neighbouring countries where (post)communist parties with new names better adjusted to suit the new liberal democratic order continued as significant players in parliamentary politics, in the Czech Republic, the KSČM have been effectively relegated to the margins of the party political arena. Although they continue to exist, even the Social Democrats, the only other nominally left-wing party, forbade themselves in a still valid 1995 resolution from ever entering into government with them.⁸ The Communists thus function as a convenient 'Other'; in media discourse, they are the scapegoat for all the failures of the transformation and seen as the domain of old-timers and nostalgics.

This thesis sets out to critique and revise what I interpret as an excessively self-congratulatory narrative of how well the Czechs have dealt with the period of state socialism, which I see as encapsulated in the 'it wasn't us' trope, i.e. a relegation of the responsibility for, and acquiescence with, the previous regime to various forms of 'otherness'. These forms can range from 'the enemy within' in the guise of agents of the former Secret Police (*Státní bezpečnost*; StB), to the externalizing narrative of socialism as a Soviet import, which, as Michal Kopeček summarizes, depicts the period as 'an interlude, an aberration from the supposed natural path of national history, an "Asiatic despotism" imported from the "East"'.⁹ I argue that anti-communism as the dominant grand narrative of the post-socialist era in the Czech Republic suffers from a fundamental paradox. On the one hand, by rejecting the past, it divests responsibility and casts the present as a manifestation of an obvious progress from the times of state socialism; yet on the other hand, the same anti-communist rejection also leads to the belief that communists still lurk everywhere and public life needs to be purged of them – a convenient political tool that loomed large over the post-socialist public sphere. It thus almost appears as if the discursive category of 'communists', who seem not to have existed before 1989 (as in Kaaba's vision of state socialism without communists), only emerged after 1989 to jeopardize the new liberal democracy with their constant threat of

⁸ This is known as the 'Bohumín resolution' [*Bohumínské usnesení*] after the Moravian town where it was passed. See Martin Bastl et al., *Krajní pravice a krajní levice v ČR* (Prague: Grada Publishing, 2001), 21.

⁹ Kopeček, 'In Search of National Memory', 77.

returning matters to the 'old order'.¹⁰ The various permutations of this paradox in public discourse and representations will be analysed in detail in subsequent chapters.

Although the past that the cultural products in this study return to is a Czechoslovak one, this enquiry will only be focusing on the Czech side after 1989. This is mainly for the reason that Slovakia took a considerably different political path after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the split of Czechoslovakia in 1993 in particular, with a substantial amount of power concentrated in the hands of Vladimír Mečiar, which has resulted in very dissimilar valences and memories being attached to the socialist period. Doing justice to Slovakia's divergent story, the reasons for which are touched upon in Chapter 2, would require a different, comparative project. The fact that the shared past of the Czechs and Slovaks has produced dissimilar narratives concerning, in particular, conceptions of national identity in the two countries, illustrates one of the basic presuppositions of this research, namely that the memory of the past comments on the present rather than the historical period it turns to.

Yet this is not just a story of Czech particularism. 'Post-socialist nostalgia', the dominant memory framework of the former Eastern Bloc, assumes there is some kind of specificity in the political heritage of the region. While attending to the details of the Czech case challenges and nuances more established nostalgic narratives, at the same time, it is one of my main arguments that the way the past has been received and consumed has little to do with a distinctively Czech experience of socialism. What I define as 'retro' can be witnessed both East and West, with the Czech Republic serving as a case study for a wider theorization of this phenomenon. The project's wider relevance beyond its immediate regional context is a contribution to the understanding of how popular culture and its circulation in the public sphere acts as one of the major structuring forces of collective memory; the specificity of this research lies in uncovering the different political agendas to which this memory is harnessed.

¹⁰ The fear of 'returning to the times before 1989' is a very common rhetorical trope, omnipresent in everyday speech and in the media. Examples are too numerous to be productively summarized here; the trope often emerges in reaction to steps that are perceived by the speaker as undemocratic or to rhetoric that is seen to be reminiscent of the language of the state socialist era. On the economic level, Ilona Švihlíková remarks that the 'argument of "returning before November [1989]" is (...) used even nowadays against all those who have other than neoliberal ideas about economic policy'. Ilona Švihlíková, *Jak jsme se stali kolonií* (Prague: Rybka Publishers, 2015), 62. All translations in this thesis, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

The German debates on *Ostalgie*, an amalgam of the German words for nostalgia and east, designating nostalgia for the former socialist East German republic, are a natural starting point for such an enquiry. Though post-socialist nostalgia is a discussed phenomenon across the whole of the former Eastern Bloc, the German case has produced the largest body of literature, which has led *Ostalgie* to dominate scholarly work on the topic. As Maria Todorova notes, ‘the reason so much space is devoted to the German situation is that, because of the state of the art, it is becoming the inevitable standard against which subsequent scholarship will be measured. This, of course, opens possibilities, but it also points to potential pitfalls’.¹¹ Certainly, some of the basic features of the *Ostalgie* discourse apply to the Czech case as well. However, as I will discuss in more detail in this chapter, the *Ostalgie* debate arose from the specific conditions of German reunification. Its emphasis on questions of German national identity does not always productively translate to other national contexts in the post-socialist region and hints at the pitfalls Todorova mentions. This thesis is thus also concerned with a critique of the nostalgia paradigm, which has become so dominant in the study of the memory of state socialism, as an ‘exportable’ interpretive framework and recognizes that a more complex typology of cultural reactions to the socialist past is necessary.

Such an undertaking is appropriate particularly since it is my contention that on the level of public discourse and popular culture, which form the field of enquiry of this study, relatively little nostalgia for the socialist period is displayed in the Czech Republic. Scholarship has often set nostalgia at the other end of the interpretive spectrum to the ‘totalitarian paradigm’, which seeks to conceptualize state socialism as an illegitimate dictatorship that held its population in check through a strong repressive apparatus. In the Czech context, the concept of totalitarianism [*totalita*] has been domesticated in the colloquial derivative *totáč*. *Za totáče* (during *totáč*) is a common way of referring to the period of Communist Party rule in everyday speech. *Totáč*, according to Jan Pauer, ‘resembles bad weather which comes and goes. It may leave some traces, but is not marked by practically any connection with the individual behaviour of people in the

¹¹ Maria Todorova, ‘Introduction: The Process of Remembering Communism’, in *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation*, ed. Maria Todorova (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2010), 9-34 (12).

conditions of the communist dictatorship'.¹² Through this depersonalization, the concept of *totáč* feeds into the anti-communist 'it wasn't us' trope.

The question of whether the previous regime can be qualified as totalitarian has also occupied German scholarship. Konrad Jarausch has discussed the opposition between nostalgia and totalitarianism, criticizing the former, more positive view for not being able to explain 'what went wrong', while the latter faces the problem that it 'takes communist propaganda claims largely at face value, and considers East German society thoroughly politicized, organized by subsidiaries of the ruling party so as not to leave space for a normal private life'.¹³ In the Czech case, nostalgia has also been seen by some as a reaction to a hegemonic narrative of socialism as a period of lawlessness and oppression.¹⁴ Such a binary opposition is, however, misleading. Instead, I propose two interrelated arguments for the Czech context: Czech nostalgia has thus far been discussed via *Ostalgie*, but this framework is not useful. The playful, humorous attitude towards the past that resembles German examples is not productively described as nostalgia, but rather as retro, which signifies a relationship to the past less concerned with an affective longing for recovering a lost era, and more with affectless irony. Secondly, such retro is not mutually exclusive with the totalitarian paradigm; on the contrary, they often reinforce one another. I argue that Czech representations underscore institutionally sanctioned narratives that frame the period within the binary of oppression and victimization. Through an appraisal and critique of these discourses, my dissertation aligns itself with a recent trend in historiography and anthropology that seeks to recapture the spaces between these polarized positions and thus present a more nuanced understanding of the period.

This is a cultural history of the Czech post-socialist relationship to the socialist past. In this context, the main questions this thesis is centred around can be summarized as follows: first, how has the socialist past been remembered in cultural representation? Second, what narratives have been created about the relationship between socialism and the present in the public sphere and in

¹² Jan Pauer, 'Totalitarismus jako teorie a jako český "totáč"', *Soudobé dějiny* 14, no 4. (2009): 699-708 (707).

¹³ Konrad Jarausch, 'Beyond Uniformity: The Challenge of Historicizing the GDR', in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad Jarausch (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 3-14 (4).

¹⁴ Reifová, Gillarová, and Hladík, 'The Way We Applauded', 202; Kopeček, 'In Search of National Memory', 75-95.

representational culture? And finally, what is the place of nostalgia and retro among these narratives? By answering these questions, I will show how popular culture shapes and contributes to particular discourses on the socialist past; investigate the political agendas of these discourses; critically assess the relevance of the nostalgia paradigm to the Czech situation; and finally, contribute not just to scholarship on the Central European region, but also to the wider question of the workings of nostalgia and retro in contemporary culture.

The findings of this project are based on the analysis of a wide-ranging corpus of primary materials. These include mainly literature, film, and television series that in some way refer to various segments of the socialist period, though some artefacts produced during the socialist period are also included where their post-1989 reception triggered a particularly strong debate about the legacies of the past. This corpus is by no means exhaustive; rather, I have selected particular works which thematize aspects of state socialism on the basis of their popularity (measured by audience size and/or the breadth of their reception networks),¹⁵ their impact on public debate, or their perceived artistic or other significance in the media. Where relevant, works which only gained a small audience and scant reviews are mentioned to illustrate how certain visions or interpretations of the past did not gain traction.

The study is concerned with both structure and reception: on the one hand, I analyse texts themselves for the kind of relationship towards the socialist past they model; on the other hand, I examine how a historical imagination of the period arises from the various reactions to these artefacts in the public sphere. I employ these complementary approaches to comment on the interrelation of temporality and the construction of political meaning: in the Czech context, the retrospective handling of the socialist past through cultural texts and practices tends to construct a teleological narrative in which the present, liberal democratic

¹⁵ By reception networks, I mean several factors, all or some of which come together to determine the impact of a particular work. These factors include the number of press reviews; where relevant, the number and liveliness of internet discussions dedicated to the work in question; print-runs in the case of literature; ratings in the case of television shows; box-office statistics in the case of films, as well as DVD releases (including 'cheap DVD' releases, i.e. the re-release of a film on DVD usually sold with tabloid newspapers and magazines for a price significantly lower than the original DVD). Data on box-office ticket sales is available from the Lumiere database, administered by the European Audiovisual Observatory (<http://lumiere.obs.coe.int/web/search/> [accessed 4 January 2016]). DVD release data is available from the Czech and Slovak Film Database (www.csfd.cz, accessed 4 January 2016).

order is posited as superior and as a progression from the period of state socialism. The story I present here is a roughly chronological one: I argue that the lapse of time since the 'Velvet Revolution' of 1989 has brought about a progressively more polarized view on the period, but within this polarization, a plurality of memory is beginning to emerge.

1.1 From nostalgia to retro

When discussing the memory of state socialism in the former Eastern Bloc, it is impossible to avoid the notion of nostalgia, which has dominated debates in the region.¹⁶ In this thesis I argue that nostalgia is not a particularly appropriate term for designating the culturally transmitted relationships to the past in the Czech Republic. As I will show, retro captures more precisely a particularly salient memory regime which is devoid of the sentimental attachment to the past that is part and parcel of nostalgia. Such a discursive move requires careful consideration of the latter category in the first instance.

Nostalgia as an analytical category is marked above all by its vagueness. As Susannah Radstone writes, 'as both a sociological perspective and an object of study [nostalgia] muddles the borders between subject and object, and in its most straightforward sense as homesickness and longing for times past, it melds time with space'.¹⁷ The guiding definition of nostalgia behind this thesis views the phenomenon as longing for an aspect or aspects of the past, which, as Pam Cook notes, have been idealized. Such a longing is predicated on 'the acknowledgement that this idealised something can never be retrieved in actuality'.¹⁸ As such, nostalgia is an emotion relating to the past. However, like other emotions, nostalgia is neither totalizing nor systematic. Neil Munro's definition of post-

¹⁶ Several edited volumes have now been devoted either entirely or partially to nostalgia across a range of countries of the former Eastern Bloc. See Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille, eds. *Post-Communist Nostalgia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010); Maria Todorova, ed., *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2010); Augusta Dimou, Maria Todorova, and Stefan Troebst, eds., *Remembering Communism: Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014); Olivia Angé and David Berliner, eds., *Anthropology and Nostalgia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).

¹⁷ Susannah Radstone, 'Nostalgia: Home-Comings and Departures', *Memory Studies* 3, no. 3 (2010): 187-191 (187-188).

¹⁸ Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 4.

socialist nostalgia as ‘a positive view of the past regime, based on a holistic evaluation of its faults and merits’¹⁹ is thus unnecessarily broad – as I will demonstrate in subsequent chapters, nostalgia rarely takes the period as a whole as its object, but rather only specific aspects of it, while easily condemning, or simply not addressing others. For instance, a significant object of nostalgia in the Czech context, I propose, is resistance against the ruling regime between 1948 and 1989. Representations that make use of this trope do not shy away from the more negative aspects of living under state socialism – they by no means wish to laud the previous political order, but generate a nostalgic investment in one specific aspect of the period. The unpleasant features of life under socialism are necessary to this kind of nostalgia: resistant gestures are defined in contradistinction to the regime’s oppression.

Nostalgia is therefore understood as either a textual feature – an emotion evoked by certain narrative strategies of texts – or a reception mechanism, where an artefact is perceived as nostalgic by its audience. In this view, nostalgia is not productively viewed as a framework for analysis; it cannot be seen as a category into which artefacts and practices can be grouped, but rather as an element generated by texts and practises. However, the identification of mechanisms that elicit nostalgia is not the endpoint of such an analysis. The underlying question to be posed is: what are the purposes and political dimensions of such uses of nostalgia?

In this context, it is impossible to ignore Svetlana Boym’s influential study, *The Future of Nostalgia*, with its differentiation between restorative and reflective dimensions of the phenomenon: ‘Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, in longing itself, and delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately’.²⁰ In Boym’s typology, the former kind of nostalgia lends itself more easily to reactionary nationalist projects, while she evaluates the potential of the reflexive strand of nostalgia more optimistically, where ‘longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one

¹⁹ Neil Munro, *Russia’s Persistent Communist Legacy: Nostalgia, Reaction and Reactionary Expectations* (Aberdeen: Centre for the Study of Public Policy, 2006), 3.

²⁰ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xviii.

from compassion, judgment or critical reflection'²¹. I will argue that restorative nostalgia is less in evidence in the Czech context than the kind of cultural memory created by various practices more akin to Boym's second type of nostalgia, although its fruitful designation under this term needs to be questioned.

Alastair Bonnett warns that creating a typology of nostalgia is always implicitly evaluative, making a facile distinction between its 'progressive' and 'conservative' forms.²² According to Bonnett, typologies such as Boym's generally privilege ironic forms of nostalgia as the sense of distance they create from their object generates a semblance of a more thorough intellectual engagement with the past than a straightforward longing for a return to bygone times.²³ If however, as pointed out, nostalgia is an emotion which acknowledges the impossibility of returning to the lost home, then its political dimensions necessarily form a commentary on the present, rather than the past. Thus, as Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko perceptively point out in their article on the politics of nostalgia in a specifically post-socialist context, 'the task of distinguishing between "bad" and "good" cases of post-socialist nostalgia has to be reformulated into the task of exploring the distinction between the nostalgic practices themselves and the political causes to which these practices may or may not contribute'.²⁴ Here I agree with Paul Grainge, who notes that 'nostalgia has no prescribed political orientation'²⁵ and only the analysis of specific artefacts and practices in their wider discursive context can reveal an understanding of the kind of memory work that nostalgia performs.

Grainge approaches nostalgia as a tool, investigating what it does rather than what it is. Differentiating between the terms 'mood' and 'mode', he proposes that 'the nostalgia mood articulates a concept of experience',²⁶ while the nostalgia mode 'articulates a concept of style, a representational effect with implications for our cultural experience of the past'.²⁷ The differentiation between mood and mode

²¹ Boym, 48-50.

²² Alastair Bonnett, *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010).

²³ Bonnett, 43.

²⁴ Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko, 'The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Practices', *Ab Imperio* 4, no. 2 (2004): 487-519 (505).

²⁵ Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Style in Retro America* (Westport and London: Praeger, 2002), 26.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

moves away from descriptive categories which stand in opposition to one another, but rather offers tools with which cultural artefacts operate, and which are not mutually exclusive. I will be following Grainge's terminology throughout my thesis to distinguish between affective (mood) and stylistic (mode) nostalgic strategies. An example of the former might be the aforementioned longing – with the knowledge that no chance of its return exists – for a time when the strictures of an oppressive regime facilitated acts of heroism. A stylistic appropriation of the past can on the other hand be seen, for instance, in the re-invention of the shoe brand Botas, associated with sports footwear under socialism, as a trendy modern fashion artefact. In this case, there is no sentimental attachment in evidence; the redesign of Botas shoes was carried out by students of Prague's Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design who had not experienced socialism themselves, and likewise the shoes were marketed as a 'young' product.²⁸ There is thus no empirical memory of socialism to speak of in this particular example, nor is it easy to detect an affective relationship to the past in this distanced re-use of a former design icon.

Such cases of distancing, which often have a commercial dimension, are, however, frequently still seen as examples of nostalgia by commentators. But such a designation suffers a terminological confusion. Mitja Velikonja, in his synthetic study of nostalgic practices across the former Eastern Bloc, distinguishes between first-hand and second-hand nostalgia in a typology that is practically identical to Boym's framework of restorative and reflective nostalgia. Yet in what sense is one of the examples Velikonja gives, 'the image of Stalin on an alarm clock with the inscription *Stalminator*—"I will be back"',²⁹ productively viewed as nostalgia if it does not evidence a longing for another era? Paul Cooke offers the example of ironic and commercialized appropriations of the symbolism of the West German militant group Red Army Faction on T-shirts and posters, which he describes as 'nostalgic kitsch revisionism'³⁰ and notes that 'it might be read as the ultimate rejection of this past, an ironic statement that the radicalism of this generation was a pointless gesture because the memory of this terrorist group now lives on as a

²⁸ Michala Komrsková, 'Botasky: reinkarnace české klasiky' [Botas: The reincarnation of a Czech classic], *Hospodářské noviny*, 18 August 2008, 24.

²⁹ Mitja Velikonja, 'Lost in Transition: Nostalgia for Socialism in Post-Socialist Countries', *East European Politics and Societies* 23, no. 4 (2009): 535-551 (538).

³⁰ Paul Cooke, *Representing East Germany since Unification: From Colonization to Nostalgia* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005), 120.

manifestation of the very consumer culture it sought to undermine'.³¹ If there is a rejection of the past at stake, then referring to it as nostalgia is not particularly fitting. Yet it is precisely such a dynamic, I argue, that constitutes the dominant mode of representing socialism in the Czech context. While some scholars have posited 'postmodern nostalgia' as a suitable term for such a relationship to the past devoid of sentimental longing,³² such a designation is more confusing than useful. I propose 'retro' as a more appropriate term.

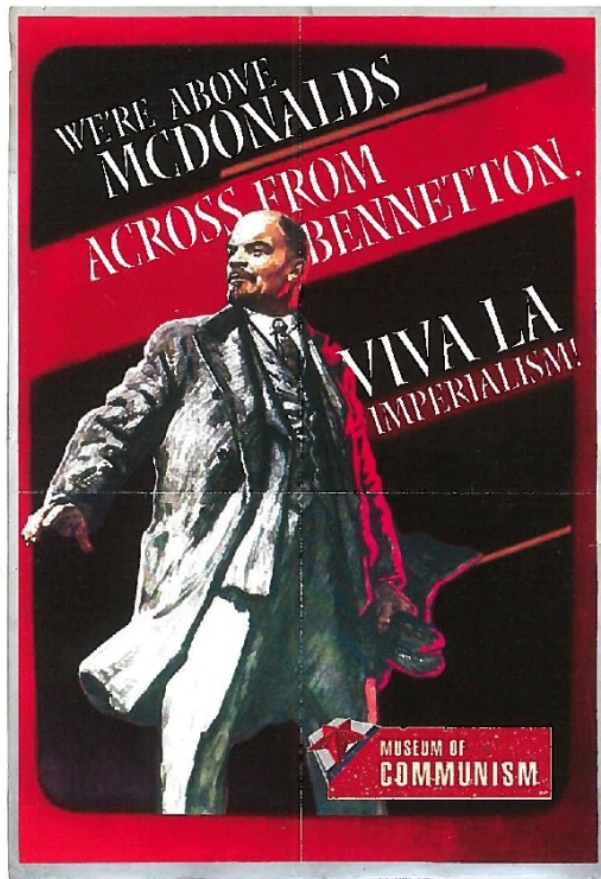


Figure 2. Museum of Communism, Prague. Promotional postcard.

To an extent, nostalgia is an inherent feature of remembering youth, which has led some commentators to perceive it as apolitical. Michal Kopeček notes that 'some of its analysts understand Ostalgia, especially outside the specific German context, rather as a manifestation of postmodern cultural mystification and

³¹ Ibid.

³² The label goes back to Fredric Jameson and has been taken up, for example, by Paul Grainge (2002). See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991).

harmless counter-culture provocation,³³ and posits it within the framework of Boym's reflective nostalgia. Dismissing such appropriations of the past as 'harmless' works with the assumption that they are apolitical. Yet it is precisely a political rejection of the past that allows for its aesthetic appreciation or even gives it an air of provocation and constitutes a political interpretation of its own. Figure 2 shows a postcard sold in the gift shop of the privately-owned Museum of Communism in Prague, which illustrates this dynamic. In an unmistakable irony, the Museum's exhibition is placed in rooms in the Savarin Palace in central Prague, which also houses a casino and a McDonald's outlet. Indeed, the Museum's marketing strategy is well aware of the paradoxical power of this idiosyncratic location: the postcard displays an image of Lenin, while the text reads: 'We're above McDonalds, across from Benetton, viva la imperialism!' The tongue-in-cheek message is ironic towards both socialism and capitalism, but ridiculing the symbols of socialism sells: Lenin is overshadowed by slogans confirming capitalism's victory over the politics he represents.

This thesis presents an intervention into the nostalgia paradigm by conceptualizing the relationship to the past captured in the above example as retro. While similar to Boym's reflective nostalgia, the latter term is inadequate for two reasons: not only is the emotional dimension associated with nostalgia confusing rather than helpful when discussing such detached appropriations of the past, it is also predicated on a different conception of temporality. And it is to the understanding of the temporal relation between socialism and liberal democracy that the production of political meaning is tied. While nostalgia sees the present moment as inferior to the past it turns to, retro in the Czech case strives for the end-point of the 'Velvet Revolution' of 1989. The knowledge of this outcome grants retro representations a position of superiority, which provides readers and viewers with a vantage point that allows for appropriating as well as ridiculing certain aspects of the culture of the past. This is, however, not a dynamic unique to the Czech context; an aesthetic fascination with the past narrated from a position of affirming the more enlightened politics of the present can be found across 'Western' representational culture as well.

³³ Kopeček, 'In Search of "National Memory"', 84.

Retro has been discussed in scholarly literature as a postmodern phenomenon and consideration of postmodernism – understood less as a means of periodization than as a stylistic repertoire – is missing from both the Czech literature on dealing with the past and the scholarship on *Ostalgie*. In *Postmodernism*, Fredric Jameson identifies a basic convergence between developed forms of capitalism, which are marked by constant crises, with postmodern stylistic repertoires that display historical depthlessness and self-referential citationism.³⁴ With the fast-tracked introduction of a capitalist market economy in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989/1991, a postmodern aesthetic also saw the interest of artists in the region, even if in the so-called West the term had rather declined in popularity, as Hillary Chute notes. Chute also helpfully points out that all culture is of course not postmodern just by virtue of being produced in what Jameson calls late capitalism; equally, many devices that are viewed as postmodern, such as irony, obviously pre-date the coinage of the term ‘postmodernism’.³⁵ My aim is thus rather to point out that the dynamic of capitalism using socialist aesthetics as its own selling point has already been conceptualized earlier on other examples within discussions of postmodernism in Western Europe and the US. Retro, which is by its very nature citationist in that it refers to something that is already there – be it historical knowledge or more often the popular culture of previous periods, thus compounding its self-referentiality – seems a particularly appropriate designation for such a dynamic. Yet retro’s relationship to a postmodern conception of history is more complicated as I argue that it is in fact predicated on a linear notion of time and progress, which seems to jar with the ‘historical levelling’ of postmodern thought. In this sense, I am not simply subsuming retro under the rubric of postmodernism, but rather point out how the vocabularies associated with discussions of postmodernism can help illuminate the workings of a particularly salient relationship to the socialist past.

³⁴ See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991).

³⁵ Hillary Chute, ‘The Popularity of Postmodernism’, *Twentieth Century Literature* 57, no. 3-4 (2011): 354-363.

1.2 The trouble with the *Ostalgie* debate

The debates around *Ostalgie* highlight a number of features of coming to terms with the socialist past that apply to the Czech situation as well. *Ostalgie* has experienced several waves of popularity: initially, it manifested in the return of GDR-era products onto the market in the 1990s;³⁶ in 1999, two popular film comedies, *Sonnenallee* (Sun Alley, dir. Leander Haußmann, 1999)³⁷ and *Helden Wie Wir* (Heroes Like Us, dir. Sebastian Peterson, 1999), both adapted from literary works by Thomas Brussig, appeared in cinemas and thus paved the way for the mass success of *Good Bye, Lenin!* (dir. Wolfgang Becker) in 2003. These representations have been accompanied by various commercial iterations of the fascination with the GDR: a number of GDR-themed television variety shows in 2003; “Trabi Safari” tours in Berlin; specialized “Ossi” shops; the revival of the *Ampelmännchen* pedestrian crossing sign, etc.³⁸

However, the major preoccupation in discussions of nostalgia for East Germany have been questions of identity, whether of a specifically East German variety, which *Ostalgie* is seen as forging, or of a unified national kind, to which some perceive *Ostalgie* as posing an obstacle. This then forms the principal difference to the Czech Republic. Although the Czechs, especially after splitting from Slovakia in 1993, also grappled with issues of identity, the lack of a ‘Western Czechoslovakia’ did not foster as strong a comparative identity discourse. That is not to say that any kind of evaluative discourse on the past is not also one that affects identity formation in the present; indeed, as will be apparent throughout the course of this thesis, the various narratives about the past under scrutiny here do often comment on the idea of a Czech national identity. However, the locus of the discussion lies elsewhere: not in the question of how uses of the past contribute to a projection of what it means to be Czech, but how the uses of the past help to create an understanding of how and why Czechs found themselves in the democratic and capitalist present.

³⁶ See Daphne Berdahl, ‘“(N)Ostalgie” for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things’, *Ethnos* 64, no. 2 (1999): 192–211; Martin Blum, ‘Remaking the East German Past: Ostalgie, Identity, and Material Culture’, *The Journal of Popular Culture* 24, no. 3 (2000): 229–253.

³⁷ Translations of film titles are my own. Where relevant, official English-language distribution titles are used.

³⁸ For a comprehensive overview of the *Ostalgie* phenomenon, see Cooke, *Representing East Germany since Unification*.

The dominant mode of public discourse in Germany after the *Wende*, i.e. the changes of 1989, viewed the history of the GDR in terms of the totalitarian paradigm: the period of state socialism has sometimes been termed the ‘second dictatorship’,³⁹ thus equating the time in question with that of the Third Reich.⁴⁰ The media played a large role in this; dominated by the West German half of the country in the aftermath of the *Wende*, they perpetuated a dichotomy of victims and persecutors, as they provided space for either West Germans who saw the state as a dictatorship or for the new East German elites who had been victims of oppression.⁴¹ This narrative was challenged on the academic level by the historiographical approaches of *Alltagsgeschichte*, which studied the everyday life of the GDR and argued that the totalitarian paradigm denies agency to the many citizens who found themselves on neither side of the dichotomy of victims and oppressors, but conversely somewhere in between.⁴² Such an approach was, however, often accused of *Verharmlosung*, i.e. a ‘softening the image of the regime’.⁴³ Ruth Reiher and Antje Bauman thus note that the contemporary appraisal of the GDR ‘fluctuated between demonization and trivialization’.⁴⁴ However, as Jarausch remarks, such debates often had little to do with gaining an understanding of what life in the GDR was like, but were all the more concerned with finding moral imperatives in the past for forming a social consensus in the present.⁴⁵

Nostalgia can be perceived as one of the reactions to the dominant public discourse in its focus on everyday practices and positive memories. Katja Neller distinguishes between *DDR-Nostalgie* and *Ostalgie*, between a general positive

³⁹ Mary Fulbrook, ‘Living through the GDR: History, Life Stories, and Generations in East Germany,’ in *The GDR Remembered: Representations of the East German State since 1989*, ed. Nick Hodgkin and Caroline Pearce (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), 201-220 (202).

⁴⁰ Friederike Eigler, ‘Jenseits von Ostalgie: Phantastische Züge in “DDR-Romanen” der neunziger Jahre’, *Seminar* 40, no. 3 (2004): 191-206 (194).

⁴¹ Thomas Abbe, *Ostalgie: Zum Umgang mit der DDR-Vergangenheit in den 1990er Jahren* (Erfurt: Landeszentrale für Politische Bildung 2005), 64; see also Eigler, ‘Jenseits von Ostalgie’.

⁴² The work of historians such as Alf Lüdtke and Ina Merkel argues for focusing on topics outside of traditional political history. For a theoretical contribution to the subject, see Alf Lüdtke, ‘Practices of Survival – Ways of Appropriating “the Rules”: Reconsidering Approaches to the History of the GDR’, in *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961-1979: The ‘Normalisation of Rule’?*, ed. Mary Fulbrook (New York: Berghahn Books 2009), 181-193.

⁴³ Jan-Werner Müller, ‘Just Another Vergangenheitsbewältigung? The Process of Coming to Terms with the East German Past Revisited’, *Oxford German Studies* 38, no. 3 (2009): 334-344 (338).

⁴⁴ Ruth Reiher and Antje Baumann, ‘Die DDR ist noch kein abgeholtes Thema’, in Ruth Reiher and Antje Baumann, *Vorwärts und nichts vergessen: Sprache in der DDR: Was war, was ist, was bleibt* (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch, 2004), 9-14 (9).

⁴⁵ Jarausch, 5.

orientation towards the GDR in the form of empirical memory and its manifestation in various consumer and cultural practices.⁴⁶ It is with the latter kind of relation to the past that I am concerned here in comparison with the Czech context. I will argue in subsequent chapters that one of the principle differences between the Czech and German situations is that in the Czech Republic, what appear to be nostalgic cultural representations and practises do little to subvert the totalitarian paradigm – conversely, they only contribute towards it.

Two factors created very different conditions for coming to terms with the past in Germany in comparison with other countries of the Eastern Bloc: funding from West Germany that enabled high quality historical research and effective administration of the archives of the secret police (Stasi), as well as the historical precedent of having to deal with the legacy of Nazism.⁴⁷ While the swift pace of the transformation made the GDR exceptional,⁴⁸ it also exacerbated feelings of loss: products from the GDR quickly disappeared off the shelves of shops, a fact that is humorously exploited in *Good Bye, Lenin!*, and the former East German territories were flooded with Western popular and consumer culture.⁴⁹ Indeed, the phenomenon of the success of re-launched East German consumer goods forms the focus of much of the writing on *Ostalgie*. Whereas in the Czech Republic the fascination with socialist brands has been more modest and couched in a narrative of continuity between socialism and post-socialism, in Germany these products became a site of the articulation of an East German “*Trotzidentität*”⁵⁰ or a kind of identity of defiance against what some perceived as West German cultural and economic hegemony. This has been read by some scholars as an empowering gesture for East Germans. Daphne Berdahl, for instance, interprets *Ostalgie* as ‘potentially disruptive practices that emanate from the margins to challenge certain nation-building agendas of the new Germany’,⁵¹ while Jonathan Bach, suggests that ‘by refusing the self-evidently superior western goods for the “good old” East German products, it is the easterner who is seeking to use the market

⁴⁶ See Katja Neller, *DDR-Nostalgie: Dimensionen der Orientierungen der Ostdeutschen gegenüber der ehemaligen DDR, ihre Ursachen and politischen Konnotationen* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006).

⁴⁷ Cooke, 27.

⁴⁸ Neller, 21.

⁴⁹ See Berdahl, “(N)Ostalgie” for the Present’; Blum, ‘Remaking the East German Past’.

⁵⁰ Neller, 48.

⁵¹ Berdahl, 193.

symbolically against the West'.⁵² Notably, such an interpretation tends to come more often from English-speaking scholars, although German critics such as Thomas Abbe, albeit in a more cautious manner, have also pointed to the therapeutic potential of recuperating Eastern products as a form of self-assurance in a public climate where East German experiences were being devalued.⁵³ Often though, GDR product fetishization and other nostalgic cultural forms are seen as an obstacle to a unified German identity, which is usually perceived as the ultimate horizon of interpretation of any kind of debate on the socialist past in Germany.⁵⁴

Ostalgic films have also been read as empowering: Paul Cooke, for example, offers a very positive reading of *Sonnenallee*, a tale of a group of teenagers growing up in East Berlin next to the Berlin Wall, when he argues that '*Sonnenallee* is the attempt to give a voice to the experience of ordinary people who lived in the GDR'.⁵⁵ Oana Godeanu-Kenworthy's assessment of *Good Bye, Lenin!* is even more optimistic: 'Wolfgang Becker's film represents a powerful statement on the healing potential of a redemptive view of the GDR past – hence of the simulacrum created – that emphasizes precisely those values that are deemed worthy of salvaging from elimination and of integration into the new collective German identity'.⁵⁶ Such interpretations, however, appear facile not least because box-office successes such as the two films in question are hardly an example of East German grassroots self-representation, but products designed within a complex market environment where West German capital plays an important role and the question of who represents whom for what audience is anything but straightforward.

However, one aspect of Godeanu-Kenworthy's observation is worth dwelling on in more detail in order to highlight an important difference between the Czech and German context, namely the idea that *Ostalgic* representations attempt to recuperate values of the socialist past that are deemed superior to the

⁵² Jonathan Bach, "'The Taste Remains": Consumption, (N)ostalgia, and the Production of East Germany', *Public Culture* 14, no. 3 (2002): 545–556 (549).

⁵³ Abbe, 44.

⁵⁴ See Thomas Goll, 'Einführung – Erinnerungskultur und Ostalgie', in *Ostalgie als Erinnerungskultur? Symposium zu Leid und Politik in der DDR*, ed. Thomas Goll and Thomas Leuerer (Baden Baden: Nomos, 2004), 9–15; see also Neller, whose book focuses on the idea that positive relationships towards the GDR might constitute obstacles to the 'inner unity' of Germany (esp. 26).

⁵⁵ Paul Cooke, 'Performing "Ostalgie": Leander Haussmann's *Sonnenallee*', *German Life and Letters* 56, no. 2 (2003): 156–167 (160).

⁵⁶ Oana Godeanu-Kenworthy, 'Deconstructing Ostalgie: The National Past Between Commodity and Simulacrum in Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003)', *Journal of European Studies* 41, no. 2 (2011): 161–177 (174).

values of the present, i.e. they turn back to the utopian impulse behind the socialist project. Much has been written about both *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!* in this regard. The latter film in particular is a story in which the main protagonist rebuilds an idealized version of the GDR: 'The GDR that I created for my mother', he reflects in the film, 'became more and more the GDR which I would have perhaps wished for myself'.⁵⁷ An even better example of a nostalgic longing for a more just society can be found in the less discussed film *Kleinruppin Forever* (dir. Carsten Fiebeler, 2004), which explicitly thematizes a desire for those values of socialism which appear absent in capitalism, such as community bonding, genuine solidarity, or social security. Using the somewhat contrived device of a chance meeting of identical twins who then exchange places – one lives in West Germany and the other in the East in the 1980s – the film focuses on the Western twin who comes to reject the values of the achievement-oriented and money-grubbing society he grew up in for a world of a common struggle for justice and true love in the GDR.⁵⁸ Such an impulse behind the depiction of the socialist past, I argue, is unimaginable in the Czech context, where, as I will demonstrate, capitalism as an unquestionable value in itself is always the default position from which any retrospective evaluations of the past can be carried out. Nostalgia for the utopian dimension of socialism is much harder to detect in the Czech case. Unlike Germany, where National Socialism looms large in the pre-GDR past, Czech representations of socialism implicitly posit as an object of nostalgia the interwar First Republic, which is surrounded by the myth of being, as Peter Bugge summarizes, 'the time and place where Czechs were at once most themselves and most European'⁵⁹ and a wellspring of a democratic Czech national identity.

If we do grant *Ostalgie* a resistant potential, then against what precisely does such resistance turn to? While the use of Eastern products may position itself against perceived West German cultural and economic domination, some scholars have tempered their optimism of the kind of identity work such products can perform by noting that so-called *Ostprodukte*, or Eastern products, take on both resistant and affirmative meanings at once as they are co-opted into market

⁵⁷ 'Die DDR, die ich für meine Mutter schuf wurde immer mehr die DDR, die ich mir vielleicht gewünscht hätte'. *Good Bye, Lenin!*, 2003.

⁵⁸ For more on *Kleinruppin Forever*, see Anthony Enns, 'The Politics of Ostalgie: Post-Socialist Nostalgia in Recent German Film', *Screen* 48, no. 4 (2007): 475-491.

⁵⁹ Peter Bugge, 'Longing or Belonging? Czech Perceptions of Europe in the Inter-War Years and Today', *Yearbook of European Studies* 11 (1999): 111-129.

practices. Daphne Berdahl notes that ‘the marketing and consumption of *Ostalgie* represents a certain commodification of resistance’⁶⁰ and Maya Nadkarni makes a similar point in relation to Hungary when she suggests that the renascent popularity of socialist-era artefacts on the one hand challenged contemporary regimes of value, but on the other hand ‘the marketing of this nostalgia also reinforced current values by commodifying these relics and subjecting them to a contemporary market logic’.⁶¹ In my analysis, I tend to incline towards the latter interpretation as a sign of capitalism’s ability to absorb any protest and turn it into a selling point⁶² – therefore, in the Czech case, I am wary of ascribing too resistant a potential to socialist consumer products, which lend themselves to commodification through their very nature more easily than memory itself. Yet even the latter can be co-opted to validate the present status quo. Irena Reifová et al. propose that nostalgia can vindicate stories that have been elided in official narratives and thus suggest that the ‘compensation of memory in post-socialist Czechoslovakia via the mnemonic function of popular culture is partly of an anti-hegemonic nature’.⁶³ However, I will show that there is little evidence for such a reading; on the contrary, the memory of socialism is used to posit a trajectory that presents capitalism as its only logical outcome.

A line of argument that comes closer to my focus is the identification of East German products as camp, which places *Ostalgic* practices within a framework of cultural recycling that acknowledges the products’ ‘quaintness’ or ‘backwardness’⁶⁴ as a selling point. Such a valuation lends itself to irony and humour: Dominic Boyer points out that *Good Bye, Lenin!*, for instance, builds one of its best jokes on the fact that the main protagonist and his friend are able to easily imitate one of the most advanced technological products of the GDR – the main

⁶⁰ Berdahl, 206.

⁶¹ Maya Nadkarni, “‘But it’s Ours’”: Nostalgia and the Politics of Authenticity in Post-Socialist Hungary’, in *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, 190-214 (192).

⁶² This is by no means a dynamic unique to the accelerated introduction of capitalism in the former Eastern Bloc after 1989/1991. A parallel could be drawn here with the argument made by Thomas Frank about 1960s counter-culture in the United States, which he suggests was co-opted and made profitable by the advertising and business culture that was thus able to embrace and ‘conquer’ criticism of itself. See Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁶³ Reifová, Gillarová, Hladík, 202.

⁶⁴ Berdahl, 194.

television news programme – with just a few props.⁶⁵ Such a positioning depends on who is performing it. As Jonathan Bach observes, *Ostalgie* can be interpreted as a genuine longing for a gone world on the part of East Germans; ‘yet when the subject is the knowingly ironic westerner (or the “sophisticated” easterner) enjoying the retro aura of GDR era design, Ostalgia appears as a (p)ostmodern artifact valued precisely for its lack of emotional attachment to a specific past.’⁶⁶ Nick Hodgkin has referred to this as ‘ideology defused by history’,⁶⁷ with symbols of the past being placed in new contexts divorced from their original political meanings, and indeed there is no element of recovering communist ideology in such cases of recontextualization. Yet such analyses tend to neglect the fact that an elision of the ideological aspects of the past forms an ideological statement in the present: it is such an examination of how facets of the past are either co-opted or discarded to form the ideological fabric of the present that lies at the heart of my analysis.

In summary, despite its significant differences, *Ostalgie* offers a number of themes that will be picked up for comparison with the Czech case throughout this project. One is the use of humour and irony as mechanisms for portraying the socialist past, something that the Czech case shares with its German counterpart, but that is less common in other Eastern European countries.⁶⁸ Another important aspect is the role of material culture as a memory trigger – which is often tied to humour – and in particular the commercial exploitation of the past devoid of memory, which opens up questions of who sets the agenda of such ventures and who is being represented. Such comparisons can provide productive springboards, while recognizing that each national context has its historical and political specificities which endow nostalgic practices with different meanings, even if they share the same form.

⁶⁵ Dominic Boyer, ‘Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany’, *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (April 1, 2006): 361–381 (376).

⁶⁶ Bach, 546-547.

⁶⁷ Nick Hodgkin, ‘Screening the Stasi: The Politics of Representation in Postunification Film,’ in *The GDR Remembered: Representations of the East German State since 1989*, ed. Nick Hodgkin and Caroline Pearce (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), 69-91 (71).

⁶⁸ For instance, Vania Stoianova notes that in Bulgaria, ‘comedy is an extremely rare genre in films about communism’. See Vania Stoianova, ‘The Communist Period in Postcommunist Bulgarian Cinema’, in *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, 373-390 (388). Likewise neighbouring Slovakia and Poland have only seldom experienced comedy as the genre of choice for portraying the period.

1.3 Narrative, memory, ideology

Nostalgia is an emotion experienced by individuals. For it to transcend the private often requires some kind of cultural mediation. The relationship to the socialist past within a society, however, is a matter of public discourse. Embarking on a project that uses cultural sources to discuss a social phenomenon thus requires some conceptual clarification. The material studied in this thesis generates images of the period of socialism which circulate through public space and are themselves both reflective and co-constitutive of a public discourse on the socialist past in the media, and expressed on a political level through legislation and the activities of various political actors. This enquiry thus does not seek to understand the historical experience of state socialism as such, but is concerned with how this experience has been painted in the public sphere after 1989: a meta-reflection of the public reflection of the period.

Such a picture is, however, not static; as Paul Ricoeur shows in his work *Time and Narrative*, human experience is necessarily arranged in the form of narrative: 'time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience'.⁶⁹ The relevance of this insight to this project is that the effort to relate to a past period – state socialism in this case – must necessarily take a narrative form. But narrative can only emerge retrospectively. The past is thus constituted from the perspective of the present and cannot be recaptured 'as it really was' – rather narratives themselves produce this past. If nostalgia is the longing for a lost era, then naming that era as lost already creates a value judgement that is only available to us because it is recounted from the vantage point of the present, in relationship to which an idea of the past can be formed. The same applies to any of the other modes of relating to the past; representations and practices relating to socialism often reveal more about the present than the past, including, significantly, how the progression of time is conceptualized.

The need to organize past events in narrative form is also useful to conceptualizing how cultural artefacts can be studied as aspects of a social

⁶⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, volume 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 3.

phenomenon. The notion of memory becomes helpful to answering this question. Memory is first and foremost individual remembering. The memories that each individual holds are initially, as Aleida Assmann remarks, fragmentary, unformed and restricted. It is 'only through narrativization that they subsequently acquire form and structure'.⁷⁰ Such narrated memories, if they are publically circulated, can become part of a shared discourse about the past. The circulation of these narratives, which are through various processes the subject of either consensus or contestation in the public sphere, is captured in the metaphor of collective memory.⁷¹

Memory is closely linked to representation. As Andreas Huyssen observes, the relationship between the two is reciprocal in the sense that 're-presentation always comes after, even though some media will try to provide us with the delusion of pure presence. But rather than leading us to some authentic origin or giving us verifiable access to the real, memory, even and especially in its belatedness, is itself based on representation. The past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory'.⁷² In this way, representation – and in particular, visual representation, given that 'ours is an intensely retinal and powerfully televisual memory',⁷³ as Pierre Nora observes –

⁷⁰ Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006), 25.

⁷¹ The concept of collective memory originates in Maurice Halbwachs's key idea that memory is only actualized in a group setting. Since the 1980s, the disciplines of history and broadly conceived cultural studies have been experiencing a 'memory boom'. The literature surrounding the topic is too wide to be reviewed here, aside from the few most prominent contributions: the usefulness of the concept for thinking about sites (physical and symbolic) of commemoration has been theorized by Pierre Nora through the concept of *lieux de mémoire*. Aleida Assmann elaborates on the role of spaces of collective memory and their relationship to individual remembering, while Jan Assmann posits the helpful distinction between communicative memory (transmitted orally) and cultural memory, i.e. shared notions about the past embodied in texts, objects, and practices. Marianne Hirsch's work addresses the issue of the transmission of collective memory across generations. See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations* 26 (1989), 7-24; Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006); Jan Assmann, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', trans. John Czaplicka, *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 125-133; Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

⁷² Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 2-3. The memory boom has given rise to a number of recent interdisciplinary edited volumes concerning twentieth-century European memory, and Eastern Europe in particular. See, e.g., Józef Niznik, ed., *Twentieth-Century Wars in European Memory* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013); Uilleam Blacker, Alexander Etkind, and Julie Fedor, eds., *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Małgorzata Pakier and Joanna Wawrzyniak, eds., *Memory and Change in Europe: Eastern Perspectives* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).

⁷³ Nora, 17.

often structures the way the past is remembered. This phenomenon, whereby images are internalized as memories by spectators has been termed 'prosthetic memory' by Alison Landsberg.⁷⁴ It is particularly relevant to thinking about how those who are too young to have an empirical memory of socialism may take their ideas – their metaphorical memory – of the period from products of popular culture, mainly film and television. As George Lipsitz remarks, 'historical memories and historical evidence can no longer be found solely in archives and libraries; they pervade popular culture and public discourse as well'.⁷⁵ How a past period is remembered is thus constituted in a wider mediascape, which the breadth of sources this project draws on tries to capture.

At the same time, institutions also attempt to forge collective memory through active interventions in remembrance practices.⁷⁶ In the case of the memory of socialism in the Czech Republic, these efforts manifested for example in the various 'transitional justice laws' of the early 1990s, which attempted to regulate how the legacy of socialism should be dealt with in the legal sphere, the activities of the Confederation of Political Prisoners, which seeks to promote the active remembrance of the injustices committed by the communist regime, or the setting up of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes in 2007. Such institutional interventions take the form of 'memory politics', which as Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard argue, interpret the past for the purposes of the 'reformulation of collective identities and the introduction or reinvigoration of the principles of legitimizing power'.⁷⁷ Such uses of the past thus have an instrumental side to them in that they are more often than not tied to a project of negotiating not only collective identities, but also the notion of a single national identity. Cultural representations may also use their evaluations of the past to influence identity formation in the present, but lack the prescriptive possibilities of, for instance, a law. In my investigation of the public discourses on the socialist past, I set cultural memory and memory politics in conversation with one another, and investigate how these contributions to the public debate on the past interact.

⁷⁴ Alison Landsberg, 'Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an Age of Mass Culture', in *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 144–161.

⁷⁵ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 36.

⁷⁶ Nora, 12.

⁷⁷ Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, 'A Theory of the Politics of Memory', in *Twenty Years After Communism*, ed. Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7–30 (8).

Here some caveats are in order. In the first place, representation and memory are not equivalent. The circulation of images of the past contributes to a public discourse on this past, but that is not ground enough to draw any conclusions about the memory of the general population. As chapter 2 will discuss in more detail, cultural producers and those who contribute to media debates are necessarily elite groups in the sense that they are able to set the agenda of public discussion; an analysis of public discourse is always limited to this field and cannot be used to extrapolate conclusions on the recipients of this discourse.⁷⁸ That is not to say that these recipients – i.e. the general public – are passive agents in this process. Although I will be arguing that in the Czech case cultural production and official memory politics do often reaffirm one another, I do not wish to construct an argument for a ‘culture industry’ that manipulates its consumers.⁷⁹ Rather, I am following the work of John Fiske, who argues that although we need to take into account that popular cultural resources are produced by those who hold hegemonic status and thus ‘carry the interests of the economically and ideologically dominant’,⁸⁰ the ability of these resources to generate resistant meanings is equally important. As Landsberg reminds us, ‘commodities, and commodified images, are not capsules of meaning that spectators swallow whole, but rather the grounds upon which social meanings are negotiated, contested, and sometimes constructed’.⁸¹ If I argue that representations of socialism are structurally organized in such a way as to generate an anti-communist rejection of the past, that does not mean that is the meaning that all consumers will take away.

In the Czech context, the work of Kamil Činátl offers a persuasive example of how the analysis of internet forums can help to gauge how viewers negotiate resistant meanings in relation to texts such as the Czech Television series *Vyprávěj*

⁷⁸ Indeed, as Vincent Post demonstrates, while attitudes towards the socialist past continue to sway the media and political discussion – the object of investigation in this thesis – they do not constitute an equally salient topic for the electorate: ‘The preponderance of what we know about Czechs’ views regarding the communist past shows that Czech voters are mostly ambivalent about the communist past and do not share the wholesale rejection that characterizes anti-communism.’ Vincent Post, *Putting out the Fire, or Fanning the Flames? How Regulating Secret Service Files and Personnel Affects Contestation over the Communist Past* (PhD Thesis, Department of Political Science, McGill University, 2015), 104.

⁷⁹ Here understood in the sense outlined in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1997).

⁸⁰ Fiske, 2.

⁸¹ Landsberg, 149.

(Tell Me a Story, dir. Biser Arichtev, 2009-2013).⁸² My project, however, privileges a broad mapping of a cultural discourse in relation to the socialist past over the detailed analysis of individual experiences, which are beyond its scope. As such I am mainly concerned with the production of meanings on a hegemonic level. Where particular examples, such as the television series *Třicet případů majora Zemana* (The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman, dir. Jiří Sequens, 1974–1979), discussed in chapter 3, have generated markedly strong responses in the media, these responses are analysed as part of a public debate that shapes the image of the past, without necessarily reflecting the opinions of the general population.

What is rather at stake in this research is an examination of how memories of the past are harnessed to particular ideological projects. Some scholars, including Aleida Assmann and Susannah Radstone, have posited a distinction between memory and ideology, but this appears to me to be a fallacy. Assmann criticizes ideology, which she argues has been used as a derogatory term that ‘denounces a mental frame as false, fake, manipulated, constructed, insincere and harmful, thereby presupposing an absolute truth that is as clear as it is indisputable’.⁸³ But by identifying ideology as ‘fake’, Assmann implies that there are other spaces – in her view, collective memory – that can be found outside of ideology. But it is not as if memory can be divested of ideology, which forms the fabric of values of any given society. I rather agree with Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson,⁸⁴ who argue that the very organization of past events into narrative form necessarily constitutes an ideological act – the task is to understand exactly how this happens and what ends are achieved by it. In this sense, my own research is less concerned with memory as such, as it is with the concept of regimes of memory, developed by Susannah Radstone and Katherine Hodgkin, which seeks to examine neither ‘memory’s essence nor its ontology, but discursive *productions* of

⁸² An analysis of reception through the internet is of course only possible with the caveat that those who choose to participate in internet debates are a specific group and not representative of reception trends as a whole. See Činátl, *Naše české minulosti*, in particular 127-176.

⁸³ Aleida Assmann, ‘Transformations between History and Memory’, *Social Research* 75, no. 1 (2008): 49-72 (53).

⁸⁴ In particular, I am following Slavoj Žižek, ‘Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology’, in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1994), 1-33; and Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), esp. Chapter 1.

“memory”⁸⁵. By understanding the processes that construct memory – in whose interest it is to propagate a particular narrative, who it is aimed at – one can begin to unravel the agendas behind different memories, be it, for instance, the legitimization of particular groups in the political arena, or the creation of group or national identities. One of the main contributions of this thesis is thus to show how, just as Czech memory processes reconcile the binary of nostalgia and the totalitarian paradigm, so too cultural uses of the past can be a site of simultaneous contestation and legitimization of the post-1989 political order.

1.4 Narrating socialism: a historiographical framework

Nostalgia is often connected with youth, a time that lends itself to retrospective idealization. This intuitive fact, though hardly novel and continuing a tradition of representing the past under socialism, has been effectively exploited by the authors of retrospective representations of the previous regimes across the post-socialist region. Child or teenage narrators and protagonists guide readers or viewers through numerous Czech literary works, films, and television series that portray socialism, but one can equally mention Micha, the teenage hero of *Sonnenallee*, or Jana Hensel’s 2002 childhood memoir *Zonenkinder* (Zone Kids) in Germany. Further afield, the coming-of-age narratives of musical nostalgia films *Stilyagi* (Hipsters, dir. Valerii Todorovskii, 2008) and *Dom solntsa* (The House of Sun, dir. Garik Sukachev, 2010) in Russia, or *Tito i ja* (Tito and Me, dir. Goran Marković, 1992) in former Yugoslavia, have made use of this mechanism as well.

The child and teenage focus lends itself to nostalgia because it allows authors and filmmakers to adopt the politically naïve perspective of the protagonists, who through their ignorance or indifference to politics cannot be seen as nostalgic for the regimes they lived in, but rather for their everyday lives. The locus of nostalgia thus seems to lie not in the political and the public, but in the personal, the private, and the familial. In such a reading, nostalgia can be seen as an empowering mechanism. Françoise Mayer argues in this vein when she notes that a number of Czech comedies about socialism ‘project a non-political vision of

⁸⁵ Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin: ‘Regimes of Memory: An Introduction’, in *Memory Cultures: Memory, Subjectivity and Recognition*, ed. Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 1-22 (1).

history, by which they return the past to all those people “without a story” who were neither communist cadres, nor former prisoners, nor dissidents, who did not particularly engage themselves for or against (...) and who, after all, constitute the vast – and silent – majority of the population’.⁸⁶ As discussed, in the German context, *Ostalgie* has been perceived by many commentators as a reaction to the feeling of East Germans ‘that their experience of living in the GDR is being elided from the German historical record’.⁸⁷ Nostalgia is thus seen to have a resistant potential; in the eyes of many scholars working on East Germany, it is understood as a regime of memory that contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the period.

In the Czech case, I argue against such an interpretation of nostalgia. Or rather, I propose that cultural reflections of the socialist period also turn to everyday experiences, but they are structured in such a way that they ultimately reinforce a binary framework of oppression and resistance. This discursive tendency frames the socialist period in a way that was prevalent in the historiography of the Cold War, which viewed socialist regimes on an axis of a dictatorial regime versus a victimized population, only occasionally complicated by examples of dissent. The corpus of texts and practises I look at does seek to establish some extent of agency for subjects in state socialism through a widespread thematization of resistant gestures – but such gestures also produce a narrative of exculpation: responsibility for the regime is always relegated to someone else, and not to the positively-valued protagonists and actors of the representations and practices in question. In this sense, Czech cultural depictions of socialism are not at odds with the public discourse on the period as conducted by politicians, journalists, and public intellectuals, which, dominated by anti-communism, elides questions of the general public’s role in maintaining the communist regime in power.

Through a critique of these discourses, this research places itself within developments in historiography and anthropology that go beyond the binary of oppression and resistance and instead consider the spectrum of positions in between. In the Russian context, this trend was inaugurated by two seminal

⁸⁶ Françoise Mayer, *Les Tchèques et leur communisme: Mémoire et identités politiques* (Paris: Editions de l’Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2004), 266.

⁸⁷ Cooke, ‘Performing “Ostalgie”’, 160.

studies in the 1990s, Stephen Kotkin's *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* and Sheila Fitzpatrick's *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*,⁸⁸ and was later given further theoretical underpinning by anthropologist Alexei Yurchak in his 2005 monograph *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*.⁸⁹ In scholarship on East Germany, Mary Fulbrook's work is equally important.⁹⁰ In the Czech case, the work of Michal Kopeček, Paulina Bren, Jonathan Bolton, and Michal Pullmann has guided my approach.⁹¹ These scholars go beyond the traditional historiography of Czechoslovak socialism, which during the first fifteen or so years after the Velvet Revolution had been dominated by political history focusing mainly on the key moments of 1948, 1968, and 1989.⁹² They by no means deny that the communist regime was undemocratic and limited the freedoms of its citizens in serious ways. Nor is it their project to defend the beneficial effects of the socialist welfare state over the system's repressive mechanisms. Rather, they demonstrate how citizens on various points of the political spectrum negotiated their everyday lives in relation to state power, and how these processes of negotiation provided them with a certain degree of autonomy and self-realization in a number of spheres. Such a discussion is particularly important in relation to late socialism, in the Czech case usually termed Normalization, the era after the definitive suppression of the Prague Spring in 1969, which opened up more spaces for negotiation than the highly repressive 1950s. Understanding how historical research has conceptualized the period is an important point of comparison which forms the starting point for examining the narratives post-1989 popular culture has generated.

⁸⁸ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1995); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁸⁹ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁹⁰ See, for example, Mary Fulbrook, 'The GDR Remembered'; Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005); Mary Fulbrook, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999).

⁹¹ See Kopeček, 'In Search of "National Memory"'; Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010); Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture Under Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Michal Pullmann, *Konec Experimentu: představba a pád komunismu v Československu* (Prague: Scriptorum, 2011).

⁹² For a detailed review of the paths Czech historiography took after 1989, see Pavel Kolář and Michal Kopeček, 'A Difficult Quest for New Paradigms: Czech Historiography after 1989', in *Narratives Unbound: Historical Studies in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, ed. Sorin Antohi, Balázs Tencsényi, and Péter Apor (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007), 173-248.

Studies based on oral historical research provide a valuable insight into how individual actors understood their own agency during the period,⁹³ but also broader social histories can convincingly demonstrate how citizens navigated repression to pursue various interests. In particular Pullmann offers a robust conceptual framework to illustrate how the late socialist regime was predicated on a wide social consensus. Following the work of Yurchak, Pullmann exposes the flaws of the totalitarian interpretive model by focusing on the role of language during Normalization. Yurchak has complicated the vocabularies employed to discuss socialism, arguing against the use of binaries in describing the period, such as those of the division of culture into the 'official' and 'unofficial' or 'censored' and 'uncensored'. Instead, he proposes a differentiation between constative and performative acts. This, he suggests, opens up new spaces between simple acquiescence and opposition to the dominant ideology: while citizens engaged less with the constative meanings of certain acts, at the same time, 'the performative reproduction of the form of rituals and speech acts actually enabled the emergence of diverse, multiple, and unpredictable meanings in everyday life, including those that did not correspond to the constative meanings of authoritative discourse'.⁹⁴ Using this framework, Pullmann argues that mastering the official phraseology in fact provided space for satisfying seemingly subversive individual interests. Such approaches thus paint a much more diverse picture of the functioning of the state socialist political system in its complexity and of how citizens managed to lead their lives in spite of, because of, and alongside state power and repression.

Another hegemonic paradigm that the public discourse on socialism engages in and that needs to be approached critically is that of transition. This designates the process whereby former dictatorships implement democratic mechanisms and transform into market economies in order to 'catch up' with Western democracies. The term was initially used by U.S. policy-makers in relation

⁹³ Here the work of Miroslav Vaněk and colleagues is particularly valuable for the scope and breadth of social and cultural topics it has covered from the perspective of oral history. See, for instance, Miroslav Vaněk, ed., *Obyčejní lidé...?! Pohled do života tzv. mlčící většiny: Životopisná vyprávění příslušníků dělnických profesí a inteligence* (Prague: Academia, 2009); Miroslav Vaněk and Lenka Krátká (eds.), *Příběhy (ne)obyčejných profesí: Česká společnost v období tzv. normalizace a transformace* (Prague: Karolinum, 2014); Miroslav Vaněk and Pavel Mücke, *Velvet Revolutions: An Oral History of Czech Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁹⁴ Yurchak, 25.

to political changes in various parts of the world from the 1980s onwards.⁹⁵ As Thomas Carothers notes, one of the core assumptions of the transition paradigm is that ‘any country moving *away* from dictatorial rule can be considered a country in transition *toward* democracy’.⁹⁶ Such a view is strongly prescriptive, positing Western liberal democracy as an unquestioned model for Eastern European countries, despite the fact that, as studies show, even as the disintegration of communist power was happening in the streets and at roundtable talks, there was very little sense that the changes would lead to a Western-style capitalist system of a strongly neoliberal orientation in Czechoslovakia.⁹⁷ Such a development only took place due to a complex set of circumstances, some of which are analysed in the second chapter of this thesis.

The analytical problem with the transition paradigm is that it provides little space for discussion of patterns outside of its normative remit: ‘the options are all cast in terms of the speed and direction with which countries move on the path, not in terms of movement that does not conform with the path at all’.⁹⁸ However, as Kopeček remarks, this poses an obstacle to historical research in that it operates with an ‘evident teleological idea of a practically “inevitable” development towards democracy’, which, however, leads to history being retold from the perspective of the “victors”’.⁹⁹ Yet, as Kopeček points out, the task of the historian is to consider the period’s context and see how at the time it was open to other possibilities and outcomes as well,¹⁰⁰ even if, or indeed precisely because, public discourse on the socialist past contributes to such a teleological interpretation of Czechoslovak and Czech history.

Of course it is not possible to place the same expectations on products of popular culture as on scholarly historical analysis – they clearly have different projects, aims, and audiences. Historiography cannot be used as a yardstick to measure representations, though not because the latter are not capable of the

⁹⁵ Thomas Carothers, ‘The End of the Transition Paradigm?’, *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002): 5-21.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹⁷ Michal Pullmann et al., ‘The Velvet Revolution and Modern Czech History in the Eyes of the Czech Population’, *Czech Journal of Political Science*, 1 (2012): 46-66 (53); Petr Zídek, ‘V roce 1989 jsme chtěli lepší socialismus’ [In 1989 we wanted better socialism], *Lidové noviny*, 20 November 2010, 22.

⁹⁸ Carothers, 7.

⁹⁹ Michal Kopeček, ‘Úvod’, in *Rozdělení minulosti*, ed. Adéla Gjuričová et al. (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2012), 9-16 (13).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

same analytical rigour as historiography, as Hayden White points out.¹⁰¹ Visual representations are often criticized by historians for using shorthand and condensing material into, for instance, the two-hour feature film format, yet such criticisms are arbitrary, White argues, as there is no 'proper' length or level of detail for a work of written historiography, which is 'no less "shaped" or constructed than the historical film or historical novel'.¹⁰² Moreover, many representations, such as the series *Vyprávěj*, which ran to 106 fifty-minute episodes, provide ample space for historical detail and analysis. The qualitative difference between representation and historiography seems to me to lie elsewhere.

As Slavoj Žižek notes, the past can be viewed through either a 'forward' or 'backward' view, where in the forward view, as events unfold, the situation and the future appear open, while in the retrospective backward view, history seems to organize itself as having arrived at its outcome by way of necessity.¹⁰³ Such a retrospective projection of a teleological perspective is to an extent inevitable by the very organization of the past into narrative form. The implication is, as Ricoeur writes, that 'this retrospective intelligibility rests upon a construction that no witness could have put together when the events were occurring, since this backward way of proceeding would be unavailable to any contemporary witness.'¹⁰⁴ While historical research can attempt to recover some of the forward view through a careful consideration of contemporary sources, popular culture is firmly anchored in the present and tends to project a backward view of the values of the time of its making onto the past it depicts. This in itself is not an occasion for lament, but the recognition that representation views the past through the lens of the present is a precondition to analysis. Given that cultural artefacts contribute to the memory of a particular period and thus circulate values in relation to the past through society, it is these values that need to be interrogated in the quest for a more diverse and pluralistic understanding of the past.

My aim in this thesis, then, is to critically analyse the relationships to the socialist past that cultural artefacts project and what those relationships reveal

¹⁰¹ Hayden White, 'Historiography and Historiophoty', *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988): 1193-1199.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 1195-1196.

¹⁰³ This idea is further elaborated in Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London Verso, 1991), 188-189.

¹⁰⁴ Ricoeur, 157.

about the present. How has socialism been remembered? What are the main genres, narrative modes, and rhetorical tropes through which state socialism has been represented in both cultural production and public discourse? Chapter 2 traces the institutional means of coming to terms with the legacies of communist rule in the Czech Republic after 1989, and argues that rather than nostalgia, anti-communism and a rejection of the past dominated the Czech public sphere at this time. Focusing initially on the party political arena and the media, the chapter identifies a number of anti-communist rhetorical tropes, which were then taken up by artists and activists in the late 1990s and early 2000s. I argue that some of these tropes then reappear in seemingly nostalgic cultural artefacts analysed in subsequent chapters. The chapter provides the background and national specificities essential for understanding the political dimension of narrative modes of relating to socialism in the Czech Republic.

Chapter 3 backtracks chronologically in order to map the cultural landscape of the 1990s in relation to nostalgia and examines closely the 'nostalgic boom' of 1999, when a number of events suddenly re-invigorated the memory of the socialist period. The main question addressed in the chapter is about the relationship between nostalgia and cultural continuity. It identifies a number of mechanisms that pertain across representations of the past, including the use of childhood narratives, humour, camp and kitsch modes, and introduces the concept of retro. The latter, I argue, is not only a textual feature, but also a key reception strategy in both re-visiting the past through the continuation of certain cultural practices and the re-creation of the past through representation. The chapter suggests retro has a distinct temporal investment in the present. Continuity is thus a key category for Czech nostalgia, as it bridges the historical break between socialism and capitalism and generates a sense of progress.

A sense of progress is also essential to the analysis in Chapter 4, which explores a number of converging narratives in relation to the socialist past that emerged from representations in the 2000s and 2010s. The chapter examines how retrospective portrayals of socialism have capitalized on the continued popularity of the popular culture of the socialist period, which they incorporate and rework into their own nostalgic narratives. The main argument of the chapter proposes that in the Czech case, nostalgia for life in the period as such is less in evidence than nostalgia for overcoming it through resistance against the communist regime

through small-scale gestures of everyday resistance that I term 'petty heroism'. The narrative of the socialist past thus focuses on its overthrowing and posits the notion of the democratic ideals of the First Republic as an implicit object of longing.

The final chapter brings the thesis to a close by mapping how in the second half of the 2000s, the Czech public sphere witnessed a discursive shift which brought the memory of socialism to the forefront of public debates. This development occurred through increased institutional interventions in the memory landscape, the educational and commemorative activities of non-governmental initiatives, and the turn away from comedy and retro as the dominant modes of representing the past. Instead, I argue, literature and film in particular experience a 'dramatic turn' in which they attempt to reclaim the socialist past for a grand historical narrative. While I suggest that on the one hand this attempt at creating grand narratives coincides with the efforts of official memory politics to project a heroic vision of the national past, both representational culture and public debates have experienced a diversification that has occasionally challenged the dominant anti-communist narrative and given rise to instances when the past has become a site of productive debate and contestation.

Chapter 2. Painting the past black and white: the rhetoric of anti-communism after 1989

1989 ushered in a variety of institutional strategies for dealing with the state socialist past in Central and Eastern Europe. In Czechoslovakia, and as of 1993 the Czech Republic, the condemnation of the previous forty years of Communist Party rule emerged as the primary agenda: active distancing from the previous regime served as a legitimizing mechanism for the emerging political elites. In comparison to neighbouring countries, Czechoslovakia, and later the Czech Republic, fairly swiftly introduced a set of legal measures which dealt with the socialist past, including the restitution of property nationalized by the previous regime to private individuals and organizations, the privatization of state enterprises, lustration, i.e. ‘the systematic vetting of public officials for links to the Communist-era security services’,¹ and the 1993 Act on the Illegality of the Communist Regime. Altogether, these measures served to validate an institutional anti-communism.² Indeed, anti-communism, rather than nostalgia or other more benign relationships to the socialist past, became the dominant discourse in the Czech public sphere and a grand narrative of the post-socialist decades.

This chapter will analyse this anti-communist narrative by focusing firstly on political acts that sought to condemn the period of state socialism, before moving on to discuss how the mantle of anti-communism was taken up by actors in a broadly defined cultural and activist field towards the end of the 1990s and in the first half of the 2000s. Both of these topics will be approached through an analysis of the Czech post-socialist media as the primary facilitator of public debates.³ Such

¹ Kieran Williams, Aleks Szczerbiak, and Brigid Fowler, ‘Explaining Lustration in Eastern Europe: A Post-Communist Politics Approach’, Sussex European Institute Working Paper 62 (Brighton: University of Sussex, 2003), 3.

² I refer to the period of state socialism, but use the term ‘anti-communism’ for the discourse analysed in this chapter, as this is not only the term used in the Czech media [*antikomunismus*], but also refers, at least nominally, to a sentiment aimed against the present-day KSČM, rather than state socialism as such (though, as it will transpire, antisocialism may in fact be a more appropriate term).

³ My enquiry is guided by Jürgen Habermas’s insight that ‘there are two types of actors without whom no political public sphere could be put to work: professionals of the media system—especially journalists who edit news, reports, and commentaries—and politicians who occupy the centre of the political system and are both the co-authors and addressees of public opinions’. In this sense, the *public debates* I am analysing consist of ‘published opinions [which] originate from various types of actors—politicians and political parties, lobbyists and pressure groups, or actors of civil society. They are selected and shaped by mass-media professionals’. See Jürgen Habermas, ‘Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension?’

an enquiry will provide the historical and political background of the institutional and public means of dealing with the socialist past for the study of the cultural reflections of the period in subsequent chapters of this thesis. This chapter will thus provide the groundwork essential for understanding the political dimension of nostalgic and other narrative modes of the memory of socialism in the Czech Republic. The nostalgia witnessed in cultural artefacts, I will argue in later chapters, does not in fact reject, but rather interacts with this mainstream anti-communist discourse, especially since, as I demonstrate, anti-communism was a narrative championed to a large degree by a cultural elite.

In an essay that provides a particularly perceptive diagnosis of the Czech post-socialist condition, literary critic Miroslav Balaščík argues that the socialist past has been narrated through an 'ethical opposition' between good and evil encapsulated already in the catchphrase of the Velvet Revolution, namely that 'truth and love will prevail over lies and hatred'. The outcome of the changes of 1989 has been cast as 'truth and love', i.e. unequivocal good, while the socialist past was degraded to the evil of 'lies and hatred'. As a result, Balaščík writes, 'the flat rejection of the communist past simultaneously brought a fetishization of liberal democracy as a system that is good a priori'.⁴ This narrative of the historical development from socialism into capitalism is the implicit precondition for the pervasive anti-communist attitude that is to be found in debates on the socialist past, though in certain instances it also took on the explicit guise of a public performance of moral categories. A memorable example was a 1996 television debate in which former exile journalist and post-1989 Minister of Culture Pavel Tigrid denounced former leader of the Artist's Union and Communist Party politician Jiřina Švorcová. 'Using administrative power, you aided non-freedom and forty years of totalitarianism', Tigrid said to Švorcová, adding: 'You harmed so many people'. When Švorcová replied not in the same abstract categories, but with specific facts and events, Tigrid opined with a metaphor: 'You have disappointed me, you only took out a quarter of your drawer and a few pages from your diary'.⁵

The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research', *Communication Theory* 16, no. 4 (2006), 411-426 (415-416).

⁴ Miroslav Balaščík, 'Banány přestaly být symbolem' [Bananas have stopped being a symbol], *Lidové noviny* [supplement Orientace], 17 January 2015, 19-20.

⁵ Pavel Tigrid and Jiřina Švorcová in *7 čili sedm dní* (7 or seven days), TV Nova, broadcast 29 September 1996, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZT02FTQaBhM> [accessed 8 October 2015].

Tigríd called for a language of moral purification. The ethical opposition is here performed as a kind of ritual, with Tigríd consistently repeating accusations throughout the hour-long programme.

The widespread binary narrative of communism as the embodiment of evil and the inherent goodness of the post-1989 developments was employed not only to condemn certain individuals like Švorcová, but also to comment on the status of the political left in general. In Lubomír Kopeček's assessment, 'the term "left" was compromised by the communist era and to be a social democrat in the first half of the 1990s, was, without much exaggeration, the same as being odd'.⁶ In the arena of party politics, through a conflation of communism with left-wing politics in general, anti-communist rhetoric was used by newly formed right-wing parties to discredit not only the continued presence of a communist party on the political scene in the form of the KSČM, but also, by extension, the Social Democrats (ČSSD), their more serious rival.⁷ However, what is of greater interest for the purposes of this enquiry is the more abstract appeal of anti-communism as a legitimizing strategy for the neoliberal status quo and grand narrative of a rejection of the past that allowed the groups that adopted its language to divest themselves of any participation in the pre-1989 political order.⁸

While militant anti-communist voices have been heard in Czech public space throughout the post-socialist period, often this discourse has a discrete presence. For illustration: in late 2014, the second channel of Czech Television broadcast a series of documentary portraits of all post-1989 Czech prime ministers, created by students of Prague's Film and Television School of the Academy of Performing Arts. In the opening episode, dedicated to Petr Pithart, who served as Prime Minister from 1990 to 1992, the director Jaroslav Kratochvíl

⁶ Lubomír Kopeček, *Éra nevinosti: Česká politika 1989-1997* (Brno: Barrister & Principal, 2010), 206.

⁷ For a detailed analysis of the party-political dimension of anti-communism in the Czech Republic, see Jiří Koubek and Martin Polášek, *Antikomunismus: nekonečný příběh české politiky?* (Prague: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2013).

⁸ Neoliberalism is here understood, following David Harvey, as 'a theory of political and economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.' Since the 1970s, this ideology has risen to become 'hegemonic as a mode of discourse' within the global economy. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2-3.

asks: 'Mr Pithart, why did you join the Communist Party?'.⁹ Though somewhat disconcerted and apologetic, Pithart launches into an obviously well-rehearsed explanation. The question could of course be purely factual. However, given that nowhere in the film is it mentioned that after leaving the Party after the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia, he became one of the foremost dissidents during the 1970s and 80s, one of the first signatories of Charter 77, and, among other activities, a prominent editor of *samizdat* texts, the question seems to imply certain political assumptions. For those unaware of Pithart's biography, he emerges from the film as a communist who later became a democratic prime minister – a sign of the pervasive presence of communists in public life. The question thus appears to be asked from one of two positions: either the filmmakers assume Pithart's achievements will be familiar, in which case they are interrogating how a moral authority like Pithart could have been seduced by the Communist Party, or they actively seek to reduce his biography to the negatively-valued characteristic of Party membership.

The series was conceived as a statement on contemporary politics by members of the post-socialist generation, i.e. filmmakers born largely in the 1980s. For some of these filmmakers, the socialist past is reduced to a few broadly drawn symbolic features, Party membership being one of the most obvious and convenient. The programme thus rehearses a widespread trope of anti-communist rhetoric, which could be summarized under the slogan 'once a communist, always a communist'. Pithart's undoubtable contribution to the moral and legal opposition to the Normalization regime can no longer expiate him of the 'sin' of having entered the Party during the political thaw of the 1960s; the latter becomes the key to judging the socialist past.

This episode is perhaps not particularly striking or dramatic as an example of anti-communist discourse; it participates in such discourse by omission rather than explicit statement. Yet this is precisely why it is significant, because it demonstrates an internalization of a logic which perceives the KSČM, and by extension communism in the broadest possible sense, on an ethical axis of evil vs. good, the latter being represented by the current political order. I suggest that this

⁹ *Petr Pithart – limity vládnutí* (Petr Pithart – The Limits of Ruling), dir. Jaroslav Kratochvíl as part of the series *Expremiéři* (Ex-Prime Ministers) for Czech Television. First broadcast on 21 October 2014 on ČT2.

has implications for the kinds of images of socialism that have arisen in cultural production in the Czech Republic in the twenty-five years after 1989. As this example, as well as subsequent case studies in this chapter demonstrate, not only politicians, but also cultural producers, including writers, filmmakers, and visual artists, have set the agenda of this discourse. In the case of cultural responses to state socialism, the particular tenor of anti-communist sentiment is often connected to ideas of heroism. In other words, who resisted communist rule, how is such resistance valued, and in what ways, if at all, should it be commemorated? In terms of civic activism, the Confederation of Political Prisoners [*Konfederace politických vězňů*; KPV], an organization bringing together those who had been politically persecuted by the previous regime, sought to directly promote a perception of their role as one of active and heroic resistance. But such questions were also frequently taken up – at least implicitly – by artists in their work.

Here it is necessary to pause briefly and reflect on a few methodological considerations. Although different voices and positions could be heard in the Czech media regarding the socialist past, here I analyse anti-communism as the attitude that rose to greatest prominence in public debates. This discourse was perpetuated on the one hand on the party-political level by the rising right wing, who thus defined themselves against the old order, and on the other hand by a relatively small group of actors, or ‘mnemonic warriors’¹⁰ in the words of Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, who pushed for an anti-communist agenda through various legislative and non-legislative means.¹¹ Bernhard and Kubik argue that ‘mnemonic warriors tend to draw a sharp line between themselves (the proprietors of the “true” vision of the past) and other actors who cultivate “wrong” or “false” versions of history’.¹² Together with the ethical opposition between communism and liberal democracy, the idea of truth and falsehood in historical interpretation is another implicit dichotomy of anti-communist discourse. The nature of this discourse I am analysing is elite, already by virtue of its

¹⁰ Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, ‘A Theory of the Politics of Memory’, in *Twenty Years After Communism*, ed. Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7-30.

¹¹ This observation is corroborated by the research of Vincent Post into transitional justice measures in the Czech Republic. In Post’s argument, ‘policy entrepreneurs’ (similar to mnemonic warriors) constitute a relatively small group who dedicate substantial efforts into promoting anti-communist transitional justice legislation. See Vincent Post, *Putting out the Fire, or Fanning the Flames? How Regulating Secret Service Files and Personnel Affects Contestation over the Communist Past* (PhD Thesis, Department of Political Science, McGill University, 2015).

¹² *Ibid*, 13.

representation and dissemination in the media, which can only be accessed by actors with certain levels of different forms of capital who wield sufficient power to set the agenda of public debates. The field of enquiry is delimited by the source base I am using: the analyses in this chapter are primarily based on a survey of the Czech daily press, with a consideration of selected radio and television programmes.¹³

The advent of online journalism has changed readership structures, but certainly in the 1990s, it could be said that Czechs were avid newspaper readers, making the press a valuable source for this enquiry.¹⁴ Throughout the first post-socialist decade, journalism as a profession enjoyed a certain prestige and was considered an intellectual endeavour; Barbora Köpplová and Jan Jiráček argue that 'Czech journalism in the beginning of the 1990s worked with a an intellectual notion of the media as an educational, cultural, and political institution'.¹⁵ Such a vision however gave way to financial viability as the main defining factor for the media, in particular with the consolidation of the tabloid press and commercial television stations by the mid-1990s.¹⁶ In general, during the period of economic transformation of the early 1990s, the media felt the need to distance themselves from the socialist past and so were supportive of the ruling right-wing governments; an eventual move towards a more differentiated political profiling of different outlets, hand in hand with increased commercialization, can be seen as the decade progressed.¹⁷

The majority of the sources in this chapter come from independent, non-partisan press outlets, in particular the three major daily newspapers that have been continuously published since the 1990s. *Lidové noviny* (People's News), with roots going back to the 1890s, was renewed as a *samizdat* organization and initially staffed by dissidents; its association with opposition *samizdat* publishing

¹³ From 1996 onwards, press analysis was conducted using Anopress, a fully searchable full-text database of the Czech print and online press, as well as radio and television news programmes. Prior to 1996, the press was monitored manually, by consulting all major daily newspapers and weekly magazines around selected significant events related to dealing with the legacies of state socialism, e.g. the restitution law, David Černý's artistic intervention on a Soviet tank in 1991, etc.

¹⁴ Steve Kettle, 'The Development of the Czech Media since the Fall of Communism', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 12, no. 4 (1996): 42-60 (47).

¹⁵ Barbora Köpplová and Jan Jiráček, 'Masová média a česká společnost 90. let 20. století: Průběh a důsledky transformace českých médií', in *Česko a Rakousko po konci studené války: různými cestami do nové Evropy*, ed. Gernot Heiss et al. (Ústí nad Labem: Albis International, 2008), 207-229.

¹⁶ For more details on the chronology of the establishment of particular media outlets, see Kettle, 42-60.

¹⁷ Köpplová and Jiráček, 222ff.

brought it considerable prestige in the early 1990s as Köpplová and Jirák note: readers felt as if 'by the very act of reading [this paper] they were becoming part of those who created an oppositional platform during real existing communism'.¹⁸ However, its circulation eventually declined and was overtaken by the other two major dailies: *Mladá fronta Dnes* (Young Front Today), originally the newspaper of the Socialist Union of Youth, which transformed itself into an independent publication after 1989, and *Právo* (Law), until 1995 *Rudé právo* (Red Law), the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, now independent, but maintaining a slightly more left-of-centre profile than its two main competitors. A rich source in this study is also the weekly current affairs magazine *Respekt* (Respect), which arose from a pre-1989 samizdat publication and has consistently provided a platform for longer opinion pieces and analyses. The newly founded tabloid press, particularly *Blesk* (Lightning), was immensely popular in the 1990s. *Blesk* even became the biggest selling daily after its founding in 1992, although by 1995, the dailies *Mladá fronta* and *Právo* sold more copies.¹⁹ The tabloid press, including the publications *Expres* (Express) in the early 1990s, and later *Aha!*, swiftly profiled itself as focused on sensationalist crime stories and celebrity gossip. Apart from *Špígl* (from the German *Spiegel* [Mirror], transcribed phonetically into Czech), published between 1990 and 2001, which pursued political topics in a sensationalist fashion, focusing on exposing corruption scandals or former secret police agents, Czech tabloids gave remarkably little attention to politics, making them a less useful source for this enquiry.²⁰

This study focuses initially on Czechoslovakia, and from 1993 onwards on the Czech Republic only. Here it is worth briefly reflecting upon why anti-communism did not become such a salient discourse in Slovakia, which took a different path than the Czech Republic in its institutional means of coming to terms with the legacies of communist rule, in particular through the virtual absence of

¹⁸ Ibid., 223.

¹⁹ Kettle, 47.

²⁰ The low occurrence of political topics in the tabloid press is apparent in keyword searches in Anopress, where articles from tabloids returned very few hits. Kamil Činátl has however persuasively argued that tabloid media gave space to the anti-communist narrative through promoting the memories of popular actors, who often tried to defend their role in socialist-era cultural industries by taking on anti-communist credentials after 1989. See Kamil Činátl, *Naše české minulosti aneb jak vzpomínáme* (Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2014), in particular 80-126.

lustration.²¹ Nadya Nedelsky argues that in the Czech part of the Czechoslovak Federation, the communist regime in its later incarnation enjoyed a much lower legitimacy than in its Slovak half.²² The shattering of the reformist hopes of the Prague Spring and the subsequent purge of intellectuals from public life hit Bohemia and Moravia to a larger extent than what is today Slovakia, where, according to Nedelsky, communist reformers had been 'less interested than their Czech counterparts in political liberalization'²³ and instead focused on articulating interests of national sovereignty. The federalization of Czechoslovakia in 1969 created relatively favourable conditions for Slovaks during the Normalization period,²⁴ especially since the country was headed by the Slovak Gustáv Husák at the time. The perceived illegitimacy of the communist regime in the Czech Republic led to the widespread discrediting of leftist ideas in general after 1989, while in Slovakia, according to Jiří Suk, 'anti-communism was negligible',²⁵ confirmed by the fact that Václav Klaus's Civic Democratic Party (*Občanská demokratická strana*), which won the 1992 parliamentary elections in the Czech part of the federation on a neoliberal and anti-communist platform, had little success in Slovakia.²⁶

A number of the questions this chapter will initially cover – including who were the actors who rose to political prominence after 1989, in what ways did the former dissidents to a large extent fail to become the new political elite, how did the media drive an anti-communist agenda – have been dealt with from a historical and political science perspective by a number of scholars.²⁷ Gil Eyal's work on the

²¹ See Mark Gills, 'Lustration and Decommunisation', in *The Rule of Law in Central Europe: The Reconstruction of Legality, Constitutionalism and Civil Society in the Post-Communist Countries*, ed. Jiří Příbáň and James Young (Dartmouth: Ashgate, 1999), 56-81.

²² See Nadya Nedelsky, 'Divergent Responses to a Common Past', *Theory and Society* 33, no. 1 (2004): 65-115.

²³ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁴ Jonathan L. Larson, *Critical Thinking in Slovakia After Socialism* (Rochester: The University of Rochester Press, 2013), 123.

²⁵ Jiří Suk, *Labyrintem revoluce: aktéři, zápletky a křižovatky jedné politické krize* (Prague: Prostor, 2003), 31.

²⁶ Kopeček, *Éra nevinnosti*, 136.

²⁷ Apart from Gil Eyal and Françoise Mayer, whose work is discussed in more detail below, Lubomír Kopeček provides a comprehensive analysis of the party-political scene in Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic up to the collapse of the Civic Democratic government led by Václav Klaus in 1997. See Kopeček, *Éra nevinnosti: Česká politika 1989-1997* (Brno: Barrister & Principal, 2010). A detailed examination of the personnel turnover in party politics in the early 1990s is provided by historian Jiří Suk. See e.g. 'Politické hry s "nedokončenou revolucí". Účtování s komunismem v čase Občanského fóra a po jeho rozpadu', in *Rozdělení minulosti: Vytváření politických identit v České republice po roce 1989*, ed. Adéla Gjuríčová et al. (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny, 2012), 17-60. The latter collection of essays offers further analysis of aspects of party politics from a historical

emergence of post-communist elites is particularly helpful.²⁸ Focusing on the 'new class' who gained political power in Czechoslovakia after 1989, he conceptualizes elite formation as a struggle between several groups – former dissidents, intellectuals, bureaucrats, managers, professionals, technocrats – possessing different kinds of capital, which they used to vie for positions within a 'field of power'.²⁹ Eyal is thus concerned with the ways in which different groups were able to gain purchase and decision-making abilities in the party political field.

Equally significant is the work of Françoise Mayer, whose 2004 book *Les Tchèques et leur communisme* (The Czechs and Their Communism) provides an in-depth examination of competing regimes of memory and narratives of institutional 'decommunization'.³⁰ Mayer identifies a number of discursive paradoxes that took hold of Czech public space throughout the 1990s. On the one hand, the speed of introducing specific transitional justice measures, such as lustration and restitution, contrasts with the continued existence of the KSČM, an unreformed communist party, in the Czech Republic. On the other hand, while former dissidents around Havel, who held key positions of power in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the regime, called for a conciliatory view of the past, public opinion was not always in agreement. Yet at the same time, the militant anti-communist discourse propounded by former political prisoners was also not publicly embraced. Mayer thus detects a deep ambivalence in Czech attitudes towards the past. This chapter elaborates on Mayer's observations by focusing on the rhetorical tropes of anti-communist discourse, i.e. specific figures of speech that appear within the various debates I will analyse and which re-emerge in different forms and guises in various representational narratives of the socialist past.

point of view. A number of political scientists writing in English have also analysed political aspects of the democratic transformation in the Czech Republic, in particular Sean Hanley, *The New Right in the New Europe: Czech Transformation and Right-Wing Politics, 1989-2006* (London: Routledge, 2006); Monika Nalepa, *Skeletons in the Closet: Transitional Justice in Post-Communist Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Kieran Williams, 'Lustration as the securitization of democracy in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 19, no. 4 (2003): 1-24; Nedelsky, 'Divergent Responses to a Common Past', 65-115.

²⁸ Gil Eyal, *The Origins of Postcommunist Elites: From Prague Spring to the Breakup of Czechoslovakia* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

²⁹ Eyal, xxii.

³⁰ Françoise Mayer, *Les Tchèques et leur communisme: mémoire et identités politiques* (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2004).

Furthermore, existing accounts do not sufficiently address how cultural workers form a significant discourse-creating group. The perceived significance of cultural elites for Czech political discourse has a long tradition and the prominent political role of intellectuals forms one of the founding blocks of Czech national mythology, with Masaryk and Havel usually given as examples. Ladislav Holý argues that within popular conceptions of national identity, ‘the Czechs substantiate their image of themselves as an exceptionally cultured and well-educated nation by a specific reading of their history in which they construct a close relationship between culture and politics’.³¹ Indeed, as Jonathan Bolton demonstrates, the opposition to the Normalization-era regime, in the milieu of both dissent and the underground, was largely constituted by artists and those in cultural and/or intellectual fields.³² While some of these actors chose to actively enter politics after 1989, others remained outside the party political game, but their actions and discourse were given coverage in the media. The second half of this chapter thus argues that it was not just politically affiliated actors who promoted an anti-communist discourse, but that artists and cultural workers have also actively contributed to setting this agenda.

2.1 Dissidents, monetarists, and the discourse of the new elites

Who were the new political elites who rose to power after 1989 and what kind of language did they use to advance their cause? We might begin to answer this question by looking briefly at the events of the immediate aftermath of the changes of November 1989. Western historians and commentators have perpetuated a heroic image of dissidents as the ‘winners’ of the revolution and harbingers of democracy in Czechoslovakia. Writers such as H. Gordon Skilling and Timothy Garton Ash were responsible for a celebratory and favourable reception of the dissidents, and Václav Havel in particular, west of the Iron Curtain, whereas the response to dissent was arguably more mixed at home.³³ Nevertheless, it was

³¹ Ladislav Holý, *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation: National Identity and the Post-Communist Transformation of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 83.

³² See Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

³³ See H. Gordon Skilling, *Charter 77 and Human Rights in Czechoslovakia* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981); Timothy Garton Ash, *We the People: The Revolution on '89 Witnessed in Warsaw*,

largely the group of people around Havel and the opposition movement Charter 77, who together with student representatives and cultural workers initially constituted and led the Civic Forum (*Občanské fórum*; OF), a newly formed group which headed the so-called Velvet Revolution. Representatives of the OF subsequently took up a number of official posts.³⁴ However, as Bolton has convincingly shown, dissent was anything but a unified movement, but rather a loose grouping of individuals with sometimes widely differing opinions and interests, whose critique of the regime hardly constituted a natural precursor to liberal democracy.³⁵ Indeed, the resulting political leanings of individual dissidents after 1989 could take radically different trajectories and the milieu gathered under the label of dissent was subject to a number of political and generational cleavages, including an older generation of reform communists of the 1960s such as Jiří Hájek and Zdeněk Jičínský, non-partisan actors such as Havel and Václav Benda (representing opposite points on the political spectrum), and later on a younger generation of activists who became prominent in the various civic initiatives of the late 1980s, such as Petr Placák or Jáchym Topol, who all went on to articulate diverging positions after 1989.

The position of Havel and Pithart, and with them the less politically conservative section of the former dissidents,³⁶ harks back to one of the slogans on the squares in 1989, 'Nejsme jako oni' ('We are not like them [the communists]'). Already in his first televised speech on 16 December 1989, Václav Havel in his capacity as the leader of the OF noted that 'one million seven hundred thousand

Budapest, Berlin and Prague (London: Penguin, 1999); Timothy Garton Ash, *History of the Present: Essays, Sketches and Despatches from Europe in the 1990s* (London: Penguin Books, 2000). For more critical domestic evaluations of dissent, see Milan Otáhal, *Opozice, moc, společnost 1969-1989: příspěvek k dějinám 'normalizace'* (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 1994); Ivo Možný, *Proč tak snadno...Některé rodinné důvody sametové revoluce* (Prague: Sociologické nakladatelství, 1991); Michal Pullmann, *Konec experimentu: přestavba a pád komunismu v Československu* (Prague: Scriptorum, 2011).

³⁴ For a detailed discussion of the chronology of the exchange of power between November 1989 and June 1990, see Suk, *Labyrintem revoluce*.

³⁵ See Bolton, in particular ch. 4, 115-151.

³⁶ As Michal Kopeček helpfully underlines, the labels of 'left' and 'right' need to be used with caution in relation to former dissidents in the post-1989 context (and, I would add, with respect to the political divide in post-socialist East-Central Europe in general): 'Given the forceful assertion of the economically neoliberal, conservative in terms of values, and strategically anti-communist right-wing, many liberals with a dissident past necessarily found themselves towards the centre-left of the political spectrum, even if this realization personally surprised and displeased them'. Michal Kopeček, 'Disent jako minulost, liberalismus jako projekt: Občanské hnutí – Svobodní demokraté v české polistopadové politice', in *Rozdělení minulosti: Vytváření politických identit v České republice po roce 1989*, ed. Adéla Gjuričová et al. (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny, 2012), 61-106 (72).

communists do not constitute a different moral or biological species'.³⁷ Although this may be interpreted as mainly a sign of caution at a time when the position of Havel and the Civic Forum was not yet fully consolidated, this inclusive gesture towards the communists prefigures his forgiving position, for which Havel was later criticized by anti-communist activists.³⁸ In January 1990, Petr Pithart, who had by then taken over leadership of the OF, expressed similar sentiments when he warned of over-zealous decommunization on the regional level. Pithart asked whether communist witch-hunting techniques were not being replicated: 'today, we can be afraid of only one thing: that we will unwittingly adopt the methods of those against whom everyone spoke out'.³⁹ The fear of witch-hunts against former communists continued to be also at the forefront of Havel's concerns in the coming years: in his New Year's speech to the nation in 1992, he once again reminds his listeners of the slogan from 1989 – 'We are not like them' – and warns the population, in emphatic terms, against being 'blinded by fanaticism, a bloodthirsty longing for revenge, and hatred'.⁴⁰

These sentiments, however, were not shared across the board. One of the central points around which anti-communist discourse began to coalesce early in 1990 was the continued existence of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) in the emerging party-political landscape. The 'historical parties', i.e. those parties that existed prior to 1989 within the National Front, called for a ban of the KSČ in May 1990. The OF, however, did not join this call; rather, the leaders of the movement were keen to use a non-exclusionary language of openness. As then-leader Jan Urban (Pithart had at this point taken up the post of Czech Prime Minister) explained to the daily *Lidové noviny*, 'the Civic Forum maintains that if we want to belong to the world's democratic countries, we have to demonstrate strength and maturity by relegating the Communist Party to the edge of the political spectrum through political means and competition'.⁴¹ The leadership of

³⁷ Havel's speech reprinted in *Rudé právo*, 18 December 1989, 3.

³⁸ For instance, sculptor David Černý, responsible for some of the anti-communist interventions discussed later in this chapter, blames Havel for not 'pushing through a more radical isolation of Bolshevik structures from public life'. Renata Kalenská, 'Češi se umějí jen hladit po vlastním pupku [Czechs only know how to stroke their own bellies – interview with David Černý]', *Lidové noviny*, 4 July 2003, 13.

³⁹ Reprinted in Petr Pithart, *Devětaosmdesátý* (Prague: Academia, 2009), 180.

⁴⁰ Václav Havel, 'Novoroční projev 1.1.1992', in Václav Havel, *Projevy z let 1990-1992* (Prague: Torst, 1999), 617-631 (621).

⁴¹ Milena Geussová, 'OF: Nehrát ve hře cizího režiséra' [OF: To not play the role of an outside director], *Lidové noviny*, 19 May 1990, 1.

the OF may also have been reluctant to ban the Communists because the former's legitimacy rested on a direct constitutional continuity with the previous regime as a result of the negotiated handover of power. The compromise between the Civic Forum and the Communist Party was thus, according to Kopeček, 'incompatible with a concept of radical decommunization'.⁴²

However, the discourse within the OF itself was not unified: the leadership tended to take a less radical stance than local Forum activists.⁴³ Jiří Suk notes that regional branches of the movement 'found a simple and cogent instrument in anti-communism for battling local "communist mafias" and "nomenclature brotherhoods,"'⁴⁴ while national leaders continued working with formerly communist experts, most prominently Marián Čalfa, who had displayed considerable responsiveness to the Forum during the negotiations of late 1989, and who as a result enjoyed Havel's confidence as Federal Prime Minister until the parliamentary elections in June 1992.⁴⁵ Decommunization and its differing conceptions at the top and regional levels of the OF thus became one of the main contributing factors to the disintegration of the increasingly faction-ridden organization at the end of 1990.⁴⁶ The dissident wing transformed into *Občanské hnutí* (The Civic Movement; OH) in 1991, which continued a similar agenda. OH was however swiftly eclipsed by the rise of Václav Klaus and his *Občanská demokratická strana* (Civic Democratic Party; ODS), which would go on to win the 1992 parliamentary elections.

Klaus had joined the Civic Forum as an economic expert from the Prognostic Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. A number of the Institute's researchers shortly rose to prominent positions in Czech politics as the group who offered the most persuasive recipe for economic transformation (an

⁴² Kopeček, *Éra nevinnosti*, 54.

⁴³ The OF acted as an umbrella organization for people with widely divergent lines of thought. The discourse of the OF was thus by no means unified and its amorphousness certainly played a role in the movement's disintegration. For instance, OF representatives from a chemical plant in Litvínov found Pithart's fears of anti-communist witch-hunting exaggerated, complaining instead that there was no chance for truly radical measures to be put in place. There would be no 'pogrom on the communists' because OF activists, 'the last truly honest people', were growing 'tired', they wrote. See L. Jaroš et al, 'Tráva, která neroste' [Grass that is not growing], *Respekt*, 17 October 1990, 2. See also Hanley, 76.

⁴⁴ Suk, *Labyrintem revoluce*, 31.

⁴⁵ Already in his first televised speech, Havel declared that 'our confidence in Mr Čalfa is growing by the hour. If other communists will act the way he does, it will be good for both our nations'. *Rudé právo*, 18 December 1989, 3. See also Kopeček, *Éra nevinnosti*, 78; Jan Měchýř, *Velký převrat nebo snad revoluce sametová* (Prague: Progetto, 1999), 107.

⁴⁶ Suk, *Labyrintem revoluce*, 31.

area in which the dissidents lagged behind). These ‘monetarists’,⁴⁷ as Gil Eyal and Johanna Bockman convincingly show, had already long before 1989 envisioned such a transformation in distinctly neoliberal terms.⁴⁸ As Eyal notes, in a sense both the former dissidents and the new economic elite shared the aim of ‘creating conditions under which individuals will govern themselves’,⁴⁹ but had radically different ideas on how to achieve this: while for Havel and others this was a question of morality, for the monetarists it was the market in which they put faith to set ‘true’ prices and thus create the preconditions for other freedoms, one of the ‘cardinal features’⁵⁰ of neoliberal ideology.

Klaus and Havel profiled themselves as political opponents; their personal dispute became one of the leitmotifs of Czech politics in the 1990s. Klaus built his image around rhetoric that rejected not only the socialist past, but also the legacies of dissent, and in particular the vision of a ‘third way’ initially propagated by the Havelian wing of dissent and the associated idea of anti-party politics.⁵¹ While Havel propagated a vision of politics that emerged from dissident thought based on a developed civil society and the activity of civic initiatives as a free space outside of direct state control,⁵² Klaus framed the options of Czechoslovak politics as a binary choice between a return to communism and a return to Europe. In a 1990 speech in which he argued for the OF’s transformation into a political party, Klaus stated:

We should point clearly to the paths that do not lead to a modern European state. We should state clearly that a third way in economics or politics does not lead to it. We should state clearly that any attempts at any symbiosis of any specific types of state regulation of the market do not lead to it, that no experimental idea of civic

⁴⁷ See Eyal, *The Origins of Postcommunist Elites*.

⁴⁸ See Johanna Bockman and Gil Eyal, ‘Eastern Europe as a Laboratory for Economic Knowledge: The Transnational Roots of Neoliberalism’, *American Journal of Sociology* 108, no. 2 (2002): 310-352.

⁴⁹ Eyal, 88.

⁵⁰ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 7.

⁵¹ The ‘Third Way’ was a concept initially used by the economic reformers of the Prague Spring, such as Ota Šik, who sought to synthesize free market elements with a heavily state-controlled economy. See Hanley, 165. Hanley also notes that Klaus’s ODS ‘used anti-communism in more sustained and sophisticated ways as an ideological device to frame the post-communist transformation as a continuation of the struggle against communism (...). It thus presented its centrist and social democratic opponents more subtly as proponents of ‘Third Ways’ between Soviet-style communism and the West European mainstream in a way reminiscent of the failed reform communism of the 1960s’. Hanley, 16.

⁵² Michal Kopeček, ‘Disent jako minulost’, 104.

initiatives leads to it. We should state clearly that the path of socialism with a human face does not lead to a modern European state.⁵³

By posing all of the above-mentioned options as obstacles to a 'return to Europe', Klaus performed a rhetorical manoeuvre which cast reform communism, civil society, and market regulation on par with the idea of a third way, thus positioning himself against both the dissidents and the reformers of the 1960s.

The ideological challenge that Klaus and his followers posed to the dissident position is crucial to understanding the directions that anti-communist rhetoric would take, as it revealed two competing tendencies: anti-communism could be performed both as an instrumental strategy employed within the party-political struggle, as well as an ideological position marked by obstinate dogmatism. Not only were various 'lustration affairs' used to discredit political opponents,⁵⁴ anti-communism as an ideological position gained at times quite absurd dimensions, as when Klaus, at the time already Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, refused to attend the funeral of Alexander Dubček, the foremost of the reform communists, in 1992.⁵⁵

The fact that many former dissidents had themselves been reform communists before actively taking up a critique of the regime allowed Klaus and his allies to discredit them and thus use anti-communism to further their political agenda. As a representative of the so-called 'grey zone'⁵⁶ – the large swathes of the population who were internally opposed to the regime, but did not voice a public critique – Klaus could position himself against both reform communists and dissidents, where his 'main rhetorical device was to relegate both these groups to the past, as "men of '68"'.⁵⁷ The trope of the unabsolvable guilt of having once

⁵³ Václav Klaus, 'Projev na pracovním setkání Občanských fór v Olomouci dne 8.12.1990', in Václav Klaus, *O tvář zítřka (rok devadesátý)* (Prague: Pražská imaginace, 1991), 203-207 (203).

⁵⁴ An early example was the so-called 'Bartončík affair', where certain parts of the OF sought to discredit their main opponent in the 1990 elections, the Czechoslovak People's Party, through allegations of one of their prominent member's cooperation with the secret police. Měchýř, 134.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁵⁶ This term, used initially within *samizdat* publishing, was championed by sociologist Jiřina Šiklová in an article entitled 'The Gray Zone and the Future of Dissent in Czechoslovakia', published in *Social Research* in summer 1990. In a 2005 interview, Šiklová describes the milieu of the Prognostic Institute where Klaus worked prior to 1989 as an example of a grey zone setting. Václav Moravec interviews Jiřina Šiklová, *BBC*, 17 June 2005, transcript available online

http://www.bbc.co.uk/czech/interview/story/2005/06/050616_siklova.shtml [accessed 8 October 2015]. Klaus himself has been keen to emphasize the 'inner resistance' of ordinary people over the activities of dissidents, see e.g. Václav Klaus, '17. listopad v českých dějinách' [17 November in Czech history], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 15 November 2003, 1. See also Hanley, 11-12.

⁵⁷ Eyal, 150.

been a communist witnessed above on the example of Pithart begins to take firm ground at this time. The endurance and all-encompassing quality of this trope could be seen in a 2014 interview, in which Klaus controversially claimed that even Havel, who had never been a member of the Communist Party, was 'mentally a reform communist'.⁵⁸

Klaus's plans for a quick overhaul of the economy, were, however, genuinely popular, and it should be noted that the vast majority of the liberal elites including Havel and former dissidents, supported them.⁵⁹ A consensus swiftly formed around the need for a market economy, mainly through the work of the media. As Steve Kettle pointed out, media were generally supportive of the ruling right-wing, as a result of the belief that 'being critical of a government that is trying to establish democracy is equivalent to an attack on the democratic process itself, and a pragmatic calculation by both journalists and publishers alike that it is better and more profitable to remain on the side of the party or group that calls the political shots'.⁶⁰ An example of the laudatory stance the media took can be seen in the four-part television programme *Léčba Klausem* (Healing according to Klaus, dir. Igor Chaun, 1991), made for and funded by the public broadcaster, Czechoslovak Television. The programme, created by then Film Academy student and one of the student leaders of the Velvet Revolution, Igor Chaun, was designed to familiarize the public with Klaus's programme of economic 'shock therapy'. Although the show did give space to counter-opinions, as Chaun admits in the introduction to a newly edited version from 2014, the aim of the programme was to 'swing the pendulum to the right after those forty-two years of violent leftist abuse'.⁶¹ As Jan Měchýř comments, this resulted in the somewhat ironic situation where this 'liberal artistic act was apparently still financed in the socialist way – from state funds'.⁶²

The film takes on the tabloid press, in particular the publications *Špígl* and *Expres*, and ridicules their critique of economic reform as fed on conspiracy

⁵⁸ Jiří Kubík and Václav Dolejší, 'Klaus: Havel byl vlastně reformní komunist' [Klaus: Havel was basically a reform communist], *iDnes.cz*, 1 November 2014, http://zpravy.idnes.cz/rozhovor-klaus-havel-byl-reformni-komunista-f39-/domaci.aspx?c=A141031_173934_domaci_wlk [accessed 6 February 2015].

⁵⁹ Havel interviewed in *Léčba Klausem*, dir. Igor Chaun, Czechoslovak Television, 1991.

⁶⁰ Kettle, 44.

⁶¹ The video is available on Chaun's youtube channel, Goscha TV, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-em973t2SQ>, [accessed 9 February 2015].

⁶² Měchýř, 244.

theories.⁶³ The programme thus positioned itself within the consensus of the mainstream media⁶⁴ on the correctness of Klaus's path to economic freedom. The generally positive reception of a market economy modelled along neoliberal principles led to a situation where even the 'demand for a *social*-market economy could be labelled as the return of Bolshevik totalitarianism'.⁶⁵ This monetarist hegemony thus consolidated the conflation of the left with communism, another recurring trope of anti-communist rhetoric. Instrumental anti-communism was, however, not just used as a means of creating a binary opposition of good vs. evil, to which political opponents could be relegated. It was also taken up as the most immediately available token of right-wing credentials in the new political climate. Although the desire of those adopting anti-communist attitudes to perform and enact a genuine reckoning with the past cannot be underestimated, many of the actors from diverse backgrounds entering politics at the time did not have access to the contents of neoliberal ideology in the same way as Klaus and other economic experts, who came from an academic policy-oriented milieu, which had long been conversant with Western economic paradigms.⁶⁶ Those who could not master this specialized language⁶⁷ could not persuasively build their rhetoric on economic expertise, and so a broad anti-left stance became an efficient gesture of moral exculpation: they may not have been dissidents, but could now retrospectively validate their inner anti-regime attitude.

⁶³ *Špígl* in particular positioned itself as the voice of the people, often using the term 'veřejnost' (the public), criticizing and exposing everyone – communists cadres who remained in prominent positions, Havel and the dissidents, as well as Klaus and the neoliberal reformers.

⁶⁴ I am here referring particularly to the non-tabloid press and broadcasting. Czechoslovak Television continued to be the only broadcaster until 1993, when TV Premiéra entered the scene (though initially only as a local station), and later TV Nova in 1994. In addition, several commercial radio stations were granted licenses in the early 1990s. For a detailed analysis, see Kettle, 'The Development of the Czech Media'.

⁶⁵ Měchýř, 174.

⁶⁶ As Bockman and Eyal demonstrate, academic economic exchange between the Eastern Bloc and Western countries, in particular the United States, flourished to a much larger degree than is generally assumed from the 1960s onwards. See Bockman and Eyal, 'Eastern Europe as a Laboratory'.

⁶⁷ Klaus was always keen to demonstrate to the public that he was conversant with English-language economic and political theory, often introducing English terms into his discourse. See, for instance, Václav Klaus, 'Snahy o hledání třetí cesty nekončí' [Efforts to find a third way are not over], *Lidové noviny*, 7 March 1994, 1,3.

2.2 Dealing with the past institutionally: the case of lustration

The newly democratic Republic made several steps as early as 1990 to deal with the legacy of communist rule by judicial means. This was, however, not always an easy task, given the constitutional and legal continuity with the previous regime that in particular the former dissidents insisted on. As Mayer notes, it was paradoxical that although the forgiving attitude of the dissidents allowed for an efficient coming together of communist and non-communist forces at a key moment of exchange of power in 1989, this attitude soon appeared as ‘an obstacle to more radical changes’.⁶⁸ If communist laws were to be respected, then no retroactive justice was possible, which discredited the claims of those who had suffered as a result of communist persecution, gathered primarily in the organization *Konfederace politických vězňů* (The Confederation of Political Prisoners; KPV). For this reason, the parliament, still largely composed of Communist MPs, passed the law on judicial rehabilitations in April 1990, which sought to reverse rulings on the basis of which thousands of political prisoners had been sentenced, in particular in the 1950s. However, as Lubomír Kopeček remarks, this resulted in a rather long-winded process, where only parts of sentences were renounced and generally little headway was made because of the limited personnel exchange in the judiciary.⁶⁹ Those coming out in defence of the former political prisoners saw this as a gross injustice. In October 1990, an indignant article in the current affairs weekly *Respekt* complained of the slow progress of rehabilitations, and proposed that ‘a radical way to solve the question of the political prisoners is to immediately and without compromises enact the status of so-called “Third Resistance”’.⁷⁰ Despite the early rehabilitation act, supporters of the notion of Third Resistance, i.e. recognizing resistance against the communist regime as having the same legal status as previous resistance movements during the two World Wars, would have to wait more than twenty years to see their demands acknowledged by law.

In October, the first restitution law was passed, which sought to return confiscated properties to their previous owners. A year later, in October 1991, the

⁶⁸ Mayer, 153.

⁶⁹ Kopeček, *Éra nevinnosti*, 47.

⁷⁰ Milena Šindelářová, ‘Třetí odboj’ [Third resistance], *Respekt*, 17 October 1990, 6.

lustration law was introduced (thus ending a period of unofficial vetting and ‘wild lustration’)⁷¹, which of all the judicial means of dealing with the past proved most controversial. These measures were further followed by two resolutions of a declarative nature condemning the communist regime.⁷² The purpose of lustration was to prevent individuals who had worked with the Czechoslovak Secret Police (StB) and who had held particular posts within the Communist Party apparatus from taking up certain public offices. However, its implementation by a parliament composed of a large number of former communists created paradoxical situations: for instance, the law did not apply to the post of the Chairperson of the Federal Assembly, and so Alexander Dubček, former leader of the Prague Spring, could act in this capacity, but could not run a post office.⁷³

The law was vocally opposed by the more left-oriented former dissidents. On the one hand, the law often concerned them directly: lustration fell hardest on those who had actively been involved in opposing the regime – ‘who else should the StB have been interested in?’, asked one journalist.⁷⁴ This then ‘placed dissidents and émigrés in an awkward situation, because their names were constantly mentioned in StB files’.⁷⁵ However, the critique that these former dissidents, mostly from OH, posed, was not just pragmatic, but based on human rights concerns and legal rhetoric. The Deputy Federal PM Pavel Rychetský argued that ‘the law is based on the principle of collective guilt and will most likely be problematic for the Council of Europe’, while OH MP Petr Uhl argued that ‘the law fundamentally violates the Charter of Basic Human Rights and Freedoms’.⁷⁶ MP Jan Sokol feared that lustration would not have the necessary impact: ‘The lustration law certainly won’t affect the big scoundrels and their names are surely not in the in the registry of [StB] files’.⁷⁷ As a *Respekt* commentator put it, ‘we have to face the objections of opponents [of the law] from the OH, many of whom fought for human

⁷¹ See Jiří Přibáň, ‘Oppressors and their Victims: Czech Lustration Law and the Rule of Law’, in *Justice as Prevention: Vetting Public Employees in Transitional Societies*, ed. Alexander Mayer-Reich and Pablo de Greiff (New York: Social Sciences Research Council, 2007), 306–346.

⁷² Act no. 480/1991 Coll, which stated that ‘the communist regime violated human rights as well as its own laws’; and Act no. 198/1993 Coll. on the Illegality of the Communist Regime and Resistance Against It.

⁷³ Jan Brabec and Jaroslav Spurný, ‘“Lustrace”: pro a proti’ [“Lustration”: Pros and cons], *Respekt*, 4 November 1991, 6-7.

⁷⁴ Zbyněk Petráček, ‘Časované archivy’ [Timed archives], *Respekt*, 25 April 1990, 2.

⁷⁵ Eyal, 157.

⁷⁶ Brabec and Spurný, ‘“Lustrace”: pro a proti’, 7.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

rights at a time when the majority of the population was a passive witness to their violation'.⁷⁸ The perceived moral authority of the dissidents thus played a role in the debate; as Mayer notes, their dissident past gave the argumentation of OH members 'exceptional legitimacy'.⁷⁹

The tortured relationship to lustration of certain parts of the political scene was encapsulated in Havel's hesitant signing of the law. In a letter addressed to the Federal Assembly, he warned that the enforcement of the law 'could be a source of new injustices and grievances, which could, at the beginning of the building of a new democratic system, create a wrong precedent'.⁸⁰ The critique of the lustration law thus identified the potential danger of reproducing communist 'cadre logic' which could lead to the new injustices that Havel spoke about by making an often hard-to-verify and unreliable fact from one's past (alleged cooperation with the StB) the defining feature of one's presence in the public field. Staunchly anti-communist MPs such as former dissident Václav Benda had sought to prevent this by advocating the publication of the files.⁸¹ Benda, and many others, however, were upstaged by activist Petr Cibulka, who published a list of all alleged agents and collaborators with the StB in June 1992, that is, just in time for the parliamentary elections. It is unknown how he got this information, nevertheless, once these unverified 'Cibulka lists' were published, they tarnished the reputation of many.⁸² Cibulka, a Charter 77 signatory (which goes to show how divergent attitudes amongst former dissidents were), can be understood as a radical mnemonic warrior in Bernhard and Kubik's sense, who refused to accept the official set of rules governing the issue and thus simply bypassed them. Cibulka remains a marginal figure, with an agenda fuelled by conspiracy theories, yet he managed to successfully bring it to the centre of public attention with the publication of his lists in his own anti-communist newspaper *Necenzurované noviny* (Uncensored News).

⁷⁸ Milan Hulík, 'Vyšší princip mravní' [A higher moral principle], *Respekt* 4 November 1991, 6.

⁷⁹ Mayer, 182.

⁸⁰ Václav Havel, letter to the Federal Assembly, document no. 978 of the Common Czecho-Slovak Digital Parliamentary Library, http://www.pscz/eknih/1990fs/tisky/t0978_00.htm (accessed 12 February 2015).

⁸¹ Brabec and Spurný, 6.

⁸² Muriel Blaive, 'The Czechs and their Communism, Past and Present', in *Inquiries into Past and Present*, ed. Deanna Gard et al. (Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences, Vol. 17, 2005), http://www.iwm.at/publications/5-junior-visiting-fellows-conferences/muriel-blaive/#_ftn1 [accessed 12 February 2015].

The lists constituted an act of intervention in a landscape that on the one hand declaratively condemned communism in its laws, yet where practical steps towards a reckoning with the past, such as public access to the StB archives, lagged behind (public access was granted, albeit in a limited way, in 1996). In the meantime, the study of the archives was relegated to Václav Benda's Office for the Documentation and Investigation of the Crimes of Communism [*Úřad dokumentace a vyšetřování zločinů komunismu; ÚDV*], founded in 1992. Cibulka's lists only further fuelled and compounded an attitude to the communist past which had already been inscribed in the lustration law. First, both the lustration law and the publication of the lists had the result that they 'shifted the focus of stigmatization from "communists" to "agents" and "collaborators"'.⁸³ Second, the shift encouraged one of the staple features of anti-communist discourse, namely a tendency towards indiscriminating generalization: we already saw earlier how membership in the Communist Party could be used as a marker of negative judgement on a person regardless of their subsequent merits in resisting oppression; similarly, anyone whose name appeared in the files was faced with an irrevocable stigma, even though the StB often kept files on people under surveillance (often because of their anti-regime activities) who were not in any way collaborating with them. This naturally concerned a number of prominent figures who had been the subject of interest of the secret police, and although many actively protested or even won successful lawsuits, the stigma often remained.⁸⁴ By including a number of public figures, the lists served to further discredit the already weakened former anti-regime opposition. The addition of the topic of StB cooperation to the discourse points to the slippery object of anti-communist critique. What makes a communist? The answer would depend on the context and the purpose, where the recipient of this label could be variously denounced as a 'sixty-eighter', an 'agent', a 'collaborator', or even a 'leftist'.

In this sense, as Jiří Koubek and Martin Polášek argue, Czech anti-communism is a discourse of the victors of the social transformation. These

⁸³ Mayer, 66.

⁸⁴ One of the most publicized cases was that of Zdena Salivarová, wife of writer and exile publisher Josef Škoverecký, who gathered her own testimony, as well as that of a number of other falsely accused 'victims' of Cibulka's lists, and published them together in the volume *Osočeni* (The Accused). See Zdena Salivarová, ed., *Osočeni: dopisy lidí ze seznamu* (Toronto: Sixty-Eight Publishers, 1993). Salivarová won a court case which decreed that her name be removed from the register of StB agents.

authors observe that in other Central European countries ‘postcommunists’ (i.e. former communists, whether reformed or not) have successfully merged with the new elites, which then led to a disillusioned ‘anti-communism of the defeated’⁸⁵ in what was viewed as a betrayal of the changes of 1989. By contrast, as we have seen, in the Czech Republic left-leaning dissidents and reform communists lost their legitimacy, while the existing unreformed KSČM is systematically not granted the status of equal partner by other parliamentary parties.⁸⁶ Thus Czech anti-communism is ‘an elite ideology. It is a firm and natural part of the cultural hegemony’.⁸⁷ This, the authors point out, creates the preconditions for the creative potential of Czech anti-communism. Indeed, the rhetoric of anti-communism has often been mobilized by artists and public intellectuals, and this, I suggest, has significant implications for the memory of socialism in the country; if we understand collective memory as being largely shaped by popular representations, such as films or television programmes,⁸⁸ then this memory in the Czech context necessarily incorporates the political stance of cultural producers who often either consciously or implicitly acknowledge the anti-communist consensus of the cultural elites.

2.3 Making heroes out of victims: the KPV and the work of Jiří Stránský

I have shown that legal and other institutional means of dealing with the communist regime set a condemnation of state socialism in law and produced the preconditions for the development of several basic tropes of anti-communist rhetoric. Amongst those advocating an anti-communist position, the Confederation of Political Prisoners (KPV) was amongst the most vocal throughout the 1990s and

⁸⁵ Koubek and Polášek, 9.

⁸⁶ Even the Social Democratic Party, who are the Communists’ most natural partner on the Czech political scene, accepted the ‘Bohumín Resolution’ in 1995, which prevents them from entering into government with the KSČM. See mzv, ‘Někteří členové ČSSD již před lety odmítali “antikomunismus”’ [Some members of ČSSD were refusing “anti-communism” already years ago], *Lidové noviny*, 20 November 1998, 3.

⁸⁷ Koubek and Polášek, 10.

⁸⁸ I am here following Alison Landsberg, who argues that ‘technologies of mass culture’ are instrumental to memory transmission. See Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). For a discussion of the mutual relationship between memory and representation, see also Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), in particular the Introduction.

beyond. The creative work of writer and one of KPV's most prominent members, Jiří Stránský, provides an arena for thinking through the discourse of those whom the communist regime had treated most cruelly: the victims of the political trials of the 1950s, who were often sentenced to years of hard labour in work camps and uranium mines. If certain commentators felt that the history of the dissidents gave their claims, for instance in the lustration debate, particular validity, then the legitimacy of the KPV in pursuing a critique of communist rule seems even higher. Françoise Mayer argues that while Czech anti-communism can often be reduced to its instrumental political uses, it also finds expression in a mobilization for the causes of the victims of communist oppression and 'it is in this context that it has a specific content'.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the KPV have largely failed to turn this content into material and symbolic gains, such as financial compensation and social and political recognition according to their wishes.⁹⁰

Wherein lies this failure of the KPV? The answer may be found in some of the rhetorical figures in which the memory of political prisoners has been articulated, the main ones being a sense of 'guardianship' of the memory of communist oppression, which casts the whole period as a time of trauma. Rhetorically, the KPV transformed themselves from victims into resistance fighters through pushing for their activities to be codified in legislation as 'resistance' rather than mere 'opposition'.⁹¹ The grounds on which the KPV built their rhetoric was their empirical lived experience of the horrors of communist labour camps, which lent their anti-communist stance a particular authenticity. The discourse of truth was present in the actions and utterances of the KPV from the organization's inception, which was pursued mainly through a rhetorical emphasis on the greater authenticity of the former political prisoner's suffering than that of the Normalization-era opposition. The president of the Confederation, Stanislav

⁸⁹ Françoise Mayer, 'Des musées de l'anticommunisme', in *Les présents des passés douloureux. Musées d'histoire et configurations mémorielles. Essais de muséohistoire*, ed. Frédéric Rousseau (Paris: Michel Houdiard Editeur, 2012), 304-325.

⁹⁰ Representatives of the KPV repeatedly complained of the lack of transitional justice. For instance, in 1997, a KPV member objected that 'We have a feeling that the authorities and judges are waiting for all of us to die out. But it will also be the witnesses and perpetrators who die out'. Luděk Navara, 'Potrestání zločinů komunismu vážne' [Punishing the crimes of communism at a standstill], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 25 October 1997, 1.

⁹¹ Marie Hanušová, 'Třetí odboj nebyl boj proti nenáviděné cizí moci' [Third resistance was not a struggle against a hated foreign power], *Klatovský deník*, 11 May 1996, no pagination.

Drobný, stated in a 1993 interview – entitled ‘Nejsme spolkem rozmrzelých staříků’ (We are not a club of cranky old-timers), which already indicates the kind of reception they were receiving – that ‘in the last twenty years [of communist rule], from our point of view, it was no real prison [to žádný pořádný kriminál nebyl]’.⁹² The KPV have in this way consistently distanced themselves from Normalization-era dissent, which they view as compromised by the communist past of many of its members.⁹³ In the view of the KPV, these dissidents tried to reform the unreformable and so relations remained cold. Drobný blamed the dissidents, claiming that ‘after 17 November 1989, we, the prisoners of the 1950s, were intentionally side-lined by the chartists, who emphasized that our demands are too radical. They clearly blocked us’.⁹⁴ The discourse of the KPV presents a particular view of human nature, which remains static: people are not capable of a genuine change of opinion and membership in the Communist Party remains a brand on their ideological profile. Such views led former dissidents, such as Petr Uhl, to resent the KPV’s dogmatism and complain that ‘the attitudes and demands of the leaders of the KPV (...) allow for a comparison with the attitudes of the supporters of the Communist Party in February 1948’.⁹⁵ Uhl thus identifies a reproduction of a similar obstinacy in the anti-communist discourse of the KPV to the object of their critique, the Communist Party, and its discriminatory practices.

From the start, the KPV were mired in petty personal disputes arising precisely from this unforgiving stance to the left in general, but also towards certain sections of the Right, which they viewed as having transferred economic power into the hands of ‘former nomenclature Bolsheviks’.⁹⁶ The KPV thus proudly professed their allegiance to a ‘primitive anti-communism’, referring to the etymology of ‘primitive’ in the Latin *primus* – first or primary.⁹⁷ The organization viewed groups across the political spectrum as not radical enough in their condemning stance towards the past and therefore as unworthy interlocutors,

⁹² Kateřina Perknerová, ‘Nejsme spolkem rozmrzelých staříků’ [We are not a club of cranky old-timers – interview with Stanislav Drobný], *Rudé právo*, 4 May 1993, 1,9.

⁹³ (ČTI), ‘Představitelé protikomunistického odboje k oslavám Charty 77’ [Representatives of anti-communist resistance on the celebrations of Charter 77], *IT CAD*, 24 January 1997, no pagination.

⁹⁴ Perknerová, ‘Nejsme spolkem rozmrzelých staříků’.

⁹⁵ Petr Uhl, ‘Proč nejsem členem konfederace politických vězňů’ [Why I’m not a member of the Confederation of Political Prisoners], *Rudé právo*, 11 June 1993, 25.

⁹⁶ Pavel Levý, ‘Konfederace politických vězňů navázala na normalizací zakázaný Klub 231’ [The Confederation of Political Prisoners picked up the threads of the Club 231 banned under Normalization], *Pardubické noviny*, 23 March 2000, 18.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

which prevented the KPV from becoming serious political actors. Instead, their activities mainly manifested in setting up various regional memorials to the victims of the former regime and continued symbolic disputes, prominently for example with President Havel. For instance, at a commemorative event at Prague Castle for the fiftieth anniversary of the communist seizure of power, *Lidové noviny*, drawing on statements from Stránský, reported that ‘the absence of the President (...) was received by the majority of present prisoners with disappointment and regret. They reproached him for not making time for them, even though the day before he received the hockey players [after the 1998 Olympic games – my note]’.⁹⁸ At times the KPV refused to invite Havel or Pithart (as a former communist) to their events.⁹⁹ The marginality of the KPV’s discourse, however, is also evident in the fact that the vast majority of press articles about the organization come from the regional, rather than national press.¹⁰⁰

While the radical discourse of the KPV did not convince politicians, when narrativized in Stránský’s work, it gained a wider audience. Set in the Czech-German borderlands, Stránský’s novels *Zdivočelá země* (A Land Gone Wild, 1991) and *Aukce* (The Auction, 1997) were adapted for the television screen in the series *Zdivočelá země* (dir. Hynek Bočan, 1997; 2001; 2008-2009; 2012). The narrative ambitiously details the whole socialist period through the story of former RAF pilot Antonín Maděra and his persecution by communist authorities. The series was described in the press as ‘returning memory’ to the nation¹⁰¹ and generally praised for offering a ‘true interpretation of history’.¹⁰² Such an interpretation can be found in the edifying project Stránský takes upon himself in terms of presenting a heroic role model. The hero of the story Maděra is a man whose democratic principles are never shaken, and who does not break even under the duress of a

⁹⁸ Job, ‘Politické vězně zklamalo, že Havel nepřišel’ [Political prisoners disappointed that Havel did not come], *Lidové noviny*, 25 February 1998, 1.

⁹⁹ Petr Janiš and Kamil Houska, ‘U pomníku obětem komunismu nebudou Havel, Zeman, Pithart’ [Havel, Zeman, Pithart will not be present at memorial to victims of communism], *Právo*, 15 February 2002, 2.

¹⁰⁰ For instance, for the years 1998-1999, a search for the keyword ‘Konfederace politických vězňů’ across all media in the Anopress database, including regional ones, yielded over 1000 results. Searching just in the nation-wide press yielded 291 results.

¹⁰¹ Mirka Spáčilová, ‘Seriál Zdivočelá země je western o naší paměti’ [The series *Zdivočelá země* is a western about our memory], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 24 February 1997, 11; (rt), ‘Zdivočelá země nám vrací paměť’, *Slovo*, 13 March 1997, 3.

¹⁰² Mirka Spáčilová, ‘Zdivočelá země vnesla politiku do kovbojských snů’ [Zdivočelá země has brought politics into cowboy dreams], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 13 May 1997, 19; Vladimír Just, ‘Zdivočelá země - Antinástup z gulagu’ [Zdivočelá země - anti-Nástup (a reference to the 1951 socialist realist novel by Václav Řezáč – my note) from the Gulag], *Lidové noviny*, 15 May 1997, 11.

communist labour camp. Instead, he continues his project of building an island of freedom on his cooperative farm, where he pursues his beloved interest of raising horses, deemed ideologically suspect by the authorities. Stránský's work moderates the uncompromising rhetoric of the KPV by portraying an overwhelmingly positive hero, who suffers only from some minor personality faults (a hot temper, for instance).

The notion of heroism is an important component of historical memory; as the subsequent chapters of this thesis will demonstrate, different conceptions of heroism play into different narrative modes about the socialist past. As in other cultural traditions, the Czech understanding of heroism has its particular cultural models and precursors. Mayer posits that 'Czech "heroes" are often martyrs (remember Hus, Fučík, Palach), but only rarely fighters (with the exception of Jan Žižka)',¹⁰³ and Robert Pynsent traces this 'Czech martyr complex' to the writings of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk.¹⁰⁴ This reading is corroborated by Ladislav Holý in his detailed study of perceptions of Czech national identity. Holý identifies a particular Czech resistance to individual exceptionalism, and instead finds a widespread egalitarian ethos, founded on a belief in an equal distribution of intelligence (as opposed to an unequal distribution of hard work). He thus persuasively reads one of the most canonical Czech fictional figures, Jaroslav Hašek's *Good Soldier Švejk*, as an expression of a decidedly unheroic national identity.¹⁰⁵ The fact that it is Švejk rather than a more conventionally conceptualized hero who is often pointed to as the embodiment of Czech national character speaks to an ambivalent relationship to heroism in Czech culture. Indeed, 'hero' can be used as an insult: characters in the popular Czech Television series *Vyprávěj* (Tell Me a Story, dir. Biser Arichtev, 2009-2013) set in late socialism, which will be the subject of more detailed analysis in subsequent chapters, often use the term *hrdina* (hero) pejoratively or ironically, to indicate disapproval of actions by which other characters draw too much attention to themselves.

Zdivočelá země attempts to reclaim the story of the political prisoners of the communist regime for a more genuine heroism. Part of this strategy is to give the protagonist Maděra further heroic credentials by making him an RAF pilot in the

¹⁰³ Mayer, 33.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Pynsent, *Questions of Identity: Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1994), in particular 190-210.

¹⁰⁵ Holý, 72-73.

Second World War, a heroic discourse which was only gradually reinstated after 1989, as its memory had been suppressed by communist authorities. Heroism is introduced through the form of the adventure story – the narrative, particularly when it recounts the immediate aftermath of the War, is modelled on the genre of the Western, with the Bohemian borderlands imagined as an unexplored Wild West, up for grabs by various honest as well as nefarious characters. Stránský presents dynamic narratives with a sustained arc over several decades, where Maděra is continuously met by new pitfalls, which he manages to resolve in a model manner.

Zdivočelá země was a popular series with high ratings,¹⁰⁶ and ran for four seasons. Within Czech cultural production of the 1990s, it forms an exception in portraying resistance against the communist regime in the 1950s.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, the notion of ‘Third Resistance’ remains fraught; even after the passing of the Act on Third Resistance in 2011, prominent resistance cases, such as those of the Mašín brothers, who killed several people as part of their activities between 1951 and 1953, are still extremely divisive and controversial.¹⁰⁸ Mayer argues that the narrative of the KPV has been relegated to the margins of public discourse, since ‘the dissident experience has come to cover the memory [of political prisoners], offering an alternative way of thinking about opposition to communism’¹⁰⁹ and further suggests that while in office, Havel aimed his efforts ‘at offering the dissident experience (which he embodied better than anyone else) as a common heritage of the nation’.¹¹⁰ However, while we saw that the dissidents certainly held more legitimacy after 1989 than the former political prisoners, overall public discourse did not seek to incorporate the dissident experience into the collective memory of socialism. Neither the legacy of the KPV nor the dissidents have

¹⁰⁶ The first season of the series (12 episodes) was watched by approximately 2 900 000 viewers above the age of 15. Source: Czech Television diary research [*Deníčkový výzkum ČT*], Czech Television Archive. See also Radmila Hrdinová, ‘Zdivočelá země vítězí nad Dallasem’ [Zdivočelá země is winning over Dallas], *Právo*, 10 April 1997, 10.

¹⁰⁷ One other cinematic representation of the 1990s dealt with the theme of political prisoners in the 1950s. The film *Bumerang* (Boomerang, dir. Hynek Bočan, 1996), was also the result of cooperation between Stránský and director Bočan. In the 2000s, several more films were made based on Stránský’s writings: two television films, *Uniforma* (The Uniform) and *Žabák* (The Frog), both 2001, both directed by Hynek Bočan, and *Kousek nebe* (A Piece of Sky, dir. Petr Nikolaev, 2005).

¹⁰⁸ Mayer notes that ‘No case raises as much passion in the Czech population’. See Mayer, ‘Des musées de l’anticommunisme’, 315. See also, Miroslav Šiška, ‘Případ Mašínů rozděluje veřejnost’, *Právo*, 26 November 2005, 19.

¹⁰⁹ Mayer, ‘Des musées de l’anticommunisme’, 313.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 314.

successfully come to represent models of heroic behaviour during the socialist period; instead, the subsequent chapters of this thesis will argue that the mantle of heroism has been taken up and transferred to the narrative of 'ordinary people', who in literary, cinematic, and other representations of socialism are depicted as the carriers of small, resistant gestures. Such representations on the one hand play into the egalitarian ethos identified by Holý in Czech culture, where few stand out as exceptional figures; on the other hand, however, such depictions also obscure engagement with the concept of accountability: if everyone is cast as having resisted in some small way, this obscures any possible inquiry into the regime's longevity and consensual aspects.

2.4 Artistic interventions in the anti-communist landscape

Not only political actors or civic groups with a clear political agenda championed various anti-communist claims. Here I suggest that it was non-political actors who further developed this rhetoric and made it truly part of the 'cultural hegemony' that Koubek and Polášek refer to. Indeed, often artists and public intellectuals would set the agenda of anti-communist discourse, which was then widely discussed in the media, as for instance the case of the initiative 'One Does Not Speak with Communists' will demonstrate.

Perhaps the earliest and most publicized example of an artist who decided to make a public commentary on a particular aspect of the legacy of socialism was David Černý, at the time a student of the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague, who in late April 1991 painted pink a Soviet tank that stood on a square in the fifth district of Prague as a memorial to the liberation of Czechoslovakia by the Red Army at the end of the Second World War.¹¹¹ This artistic act stirred up a storm of controversy, angering supporters of the communists (at that time still in the form of the KSČ) and those who had witnessed the liberation – a *Rudé právo* commentator wrote that 'a happening of pranksters is one thing, but insulting the memorials of those who died to save our lives is another'.¹¹² Indignation could also be witnessed at the highest levels: the Soviet ambassador viewed the event as a

¹¹¹ (bč), 'Tank zahalen' [Tank covered], *Rudé právo*, 30 April 1991, 1-2.

¹¹² Josef Holý, 'Vandalský happening' [A vandalistic happening], *Rudé právo*, 29 April 1991, 1-2.

diplomatic insult.¹¹³ The tank was promptly repainted to its original condition. Yet at a time when the spirit of dissent still occasionally manifested in parliamentary politics, it was soon after once again coated in pink by a group of Civic Forum deputies of the Federal Assembly. This was, as Deputy Václav Malý explained, to register their protest with the criminal proceedings against Černý for his act of ‘vandalism’.¹¹⁴

While Černý, speaking to the press at the time, claimed that the gesture was of a pacifist nature,¹¹⁵ the crux of the matter was that even though the tank was meant to commemorate the liberation of Czechoslovakia, it was inevitably, as the cultural quarterly *Prostor* (Space) wrote in its analysis of the event, widely understood as ‘a symbol of the occupation of 1968’.¹¹⁶ A further commentary added that given the fact that ‘Tank no. 23’, as it was known, was not the first liberating tank to enter Prague, as the memorial claimed, but in fact a wholly different machine, the memorial also served as a reminder of the ‘falsification of history’.¹¹⁷ The tank was used by the communist regime for the purposes of pro-Soviet propaganda, in order to cover up the memory of the fact that the district of Prague where the tank stood had in fact been liberated not by the Red Army, but by General Vlasov’s Russian Liberation Army. The pink coating of the tank was an act that through protesting against what the memorial stood for blurred the distinction between anti-communist and anti-Russian sentiment. Through this rhetorical move of conflation, the action can be seen as one of the early prominent public examples of a narrative of externalization, where the communist regime is perceived as a Soviet import – one of the versions of the ‘it wasn’t us’ narrative discussed in the introduction. At the same time, the word ‘prank’ (in Czech: *recese*), which came up in the press response to Černý’s bold act, captures an ironic dimension of the reception of the communist past in artistic reworkings, where the symbolism of the communist regime can be made light of through aestheticization. Černý’s act can be interpreted as following from a tradition of downplaying militarism in Czech culture which harks back to Jaroslav Hašek’s *Good Soldier Švejk*, and indeed film comedies that ridiculed the socialist army were one of the

¹¹³ Jiří Sirotek, ‘Růžová aféra’ [The pink affair], *Prostor* 6, no. 16 (1991), 16-17.

¹¹⁴ Reported in *Události* (News), Czech Television, broadcast on ČT1 on 9 May 2001.

¹¹⁵ (bč), ‘Tank zahalen’ [Tank covered], *Rudé právo*, 30 April 1991, 1-2.

¹¹⁶ Sirotek, 17.

¹¹⁷ Zdeněk Hoja a Jiří Pokorný, ‘Pomníky a zapomníky’ [Memorials and unmemorials], *Tvar* 4, no. 1 (1993), 12.

first representational means of reckoning with the period of communist rule in the early 1990s.¹¹⁸ As the next chapter will show, such an ironic attitude will become a significant mode of perceiving the socialist past. The case of the tank demonstrates that an ironic stance which finds enjoyment in the symbols it ridicules can also be a gesture of the condemnation of the previous regime.

From the beginning of the 2000s, anti-communist rhetoric was taken up by artists and other cultural figures with greater vehemence. This may in part be interpreted as a certain polarization within Czech public discourse around the year 1999, which, as the next chapter demonstrates, witnessed a 'nostalgic turn': while on the one hand the public enjoyed a successful film comedy set in the 1960s, and revelled in the resurgent popularity of Normalization-era singers and television series, on the other hand, commentators in the press worried about these developments. Nostalgia and anti-communism form two seemingly competing discourses in this period. However, subsequent chapters will demonstrate that the Czech cultural memory of socialism is able to simultaneously accommodate both of these narratives.

Where Černý's Pink Tank allowed for various interpretations (for instance, pacifist, anti-militaristic), almost a decade later, in the year 2000, the artistic collective Podebal was much more unequivocal in the message of its exhibition *Malík urvi* (literally: rip off the pinkie; in Czech also a play on the words *malý kurvy* – little whores). This installation consisted of large-scale photographic portraits of a number of public figures with a communist or StB past, who continued to play a role in public life at the time of the exhibition. *Malík urvi* reignited the accusatory logic of various lustration affairs, which led one commentator to label it a 'visual Cibulka-like action [*cibulkovina*]',¹¹⁹ thus setting the exhibition's motivations on par with Cibulka's exposure of various public figures as StB agents in the early 1990s. While some saw *Malík urvi* as a genuine attempt to come to terms with the past through artistic means,¹²⁰ others were offended by the fact that the exhibition once again dug up old lustration affairs in which the alleged secret police

¹¹⁸ *Tankový prapor* (The Tank Battalion, dir. Vít Olmer, 1991) and *Černí baroni* (Black Barons, dir. Zdeněk Sirový, 1992) are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

¹¹⁹ Martin Dostál, quoted in 'Labyrint kultury' [Labyrinth of culture], *Reflex*, 9 March 2000, 55.

¹²⁰ Teodor Marijanovič, quoted in 'Rozbor nevšední výstavy' [Analysis of an uncommon exhibition], *Dobré ráno s BBC*, broadcast 14 February 2000.

collaborators had been cleared by court.¹²¹ For example, social democratic politician and diplomat Jan Kavan was angered that his reputation was once again being publicly questioned: 'it was total, naked disrespect of the decision of an independent court',¹²² he said, referring to the 1996 ruling that had cleared him of all charges. The unforgiving logic of the exhibition treated possible collaboration as a kind of indelible mark, where the verdict of a democratic court could not overrule the initial stigma levied upon Kavan.

The exhibition remained a niche event; soon, however, numerous artists and activists would start a public campaign in which they criticized the lack of decommunization and demanded that mainstream political parties stop cooperating with the KSČM on any level. Initiated by former dissident and writer Petr Placák and David Černý, the petition 'One Does Not Speak with Communists' was signed by dozens of public figures and eventually garnered several thousand signatures.¹²³ Černý managed to secure prominent publicity for the initiative when he designed a T-Shirt depicting a raised middle finger and bearing the slogan 'Fuck the KSČM', which was worn by guitarist Keith Richards during a Rolling Stones concert in Prague in July 2003.¹²⁴ Domestic musicians also expressed support for the initiative through a series of concerts in Prague and elsewhere.¹²⁵ One popular rock band leader invoked the aforementioned perceived tradition of cultural opposition to the ruling power when on the occasion of the first concert he said that 'people who worked in culture used to speak out against communism, the concert is a continuation of this tradition'.¹²⁶ The initiative reopened the question of banning the KSČM in the media, though party politicians were clear that the

¹²¹ Petr Rezek, 'Legenda o KSČ a StB' [A legend about the KSČ and StB], *Lidové noviny*, 13 January 2000, 19-20.

¹²² Renata Kalenská, 'Jan Kavan: Nejsem žádný KATO' [Jan Kavan: I am no KATO], *Pátek: Magazín Lidových novin*, 24 March 2000, 4-9.

¹²³ Erik Tabery, 'Nemluvte s bolševiky' [Don't speak to Bolsheviks], *Respekt*, 23 June 2003, 4.

¹²⁴ Jhv, 'FUCK THE KSČM', *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 29 July 2003, 7.

¹²⁵ The first concert took place in Prague on 18 November 2003, followed by a concert on 23 April 2004 in the Moravian town of Frýdek Místek. Another event entitled 'S komunisty se nemluví II' (One does not speak with communists II) took place in Prague on 26 September 2004. See Vladimír Vlasák, 'Muzikanti s komunisty nemluví' [Musicians are not speaking to communists], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 15 November 2003, 12; Martin Jiroušek, 'Umělci zahrají proti komunistům' [Artists will play against the communists], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 22 April 2004, 11; Vladimír Vlasák, 'Znovu proti komunistům' [Once again against the communists], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 10 September 2004, 7.

¹²⁶ vla, 'Hudebníci proti komunismu' [Musicians against communism], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 29 October 2003, 10.

initiative would not set a new agenda.¹²⁷ Where initially even more left-wing commentators interpreted the petition as a genuine civic movement for finally dealing with the communist legacy and a real intervention in the party political landscape, in retrospect the whole initiative lends itself to being read as yet another instrumental use of anti-communism seeking to discredit particular personalities. The initiative obliquely targeted Václav Klaus, who had by then not only become President by disregarding his previous anti-communism and was elected into office thanks to the votes of Communist Party MPs, but also because he had invited representatives of the Communist Party for top-level discussions at the presidential residence in Láňy.¹²⁸

‘One Does Not Speak with Communists’ illustrates particularly clearly the thesis that anti-communism is a discourse that has been championed by the cultural elite in the Czech Republic. It is not surprising that a number of artists involved in producing seemingly nostalgic images of the socialist past also signed the petition, including writer Michal Viewegh, screenwriter Tereza Boučková, or actors Eva Holubová, Ondřej Vetchý, and Boris Hybner.¹²⁹ The discourse around the initiative produced a polarization between ‘intellectuals’ and ‘politicians’, familiar already from the days of the Normalization-era opposition to the communist regime;¹³⁰ as philosopher Václav Bělohradský argues, this dichotomy between ‘non-politicians’ as ‘honest people’ and dishonest politicians, which has its roots in the dissident tradition of intellectuals posing a critique to the ruling order

¹²⁷ *Právo*, for instance, reported that ‘politicians doubt the petition against the communists’; several leading political figures expressed their opinion that the communists can only be marginalized through ‘quality political work’, and not petitions. See (dan), ‘Politici pochybují o petici proti komunistům’ [Politicians doubt the petition against the communists], 11 June 2003, 3. See also Erik Tabery, ‘Nemluvte s bolševiky’ [Don’t speak to Bolsheviks], *Respekt*, 23 June 2003, 4.

¹²⁸ Klaus’s decision is criticized in the text of the petition itself. See *Babylon*. See also čtk, ‘Intelektuálové varují před komunisty’ [Intellectuals warn against communists], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 11 June 2003, 4.

¹²⁹ ‘S komunisty se nemluví’ [One does not speak with communists], *Babylon* 12, no. 10 (2003), 4.

¹³⁰ A number of articles in the press framed the petition as an initiative of ‘intellectuals’. See čtk, ‘Intelektuálové varují před komunisty’ [Intellectuals warn against communists], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 11 June 2003, 4; čtk, ‘Petice “S komunisty se nemluví” narazila’ [“One does not speak with communists” petition hits a hard spot], *Hospodářské noviny*, 4 July 2003, 3; Jiří Pehe, ‘Kdo mluví a nemluví s komunisty’ [Who is and is not speaking with communists], *Lidové noviny*, 19 November 2003, 11. Not surprisingly, the Communist Party daily *Haló noviny* was keen to pejoratively dismiss the initiative as the work of intellectuals removed from the people. See Daniel Stroj, ‘Proč prý intelektuálové “nemluví” s komunisty’ [Why intellectuals are allegedly “not speaking” to communists], *Haló noviny*, 14 June 2003, 5.

outside of the sphere of politics, is a significant feature of Czech political culture and adopted by the liberal elites.¹³¹

However, another, deeper, underlying opposition is in operation here, namely that of how liberal democracy posits socialism as its Other. Slavoj Žižek has commented on the working of ideology in post-socialist societies in the following way: 'Socialism was perceived as the rule of "ideological" oppression and indoctrination, whereas the passage into democracy-capitalism was experienced as deliverance from the constraints of ideology – however, was not this very experience of "deliverance" in the course of which political parties and the market economy were perceived as "non-ideological", as the "natural state of things", ideological par excellence?'¹³² The stance of the artists and intellectuals who signed the petition produced precisely the effect Žižek describes: it fed into a trope of anti-communist rhetoric where 'politicians', or those responsible for political action, are set up as a distinctly 'Other' category, whereas the anti-communist speaker performing this rhetorical manoeuvre is positioned outside of the realm of political responsibility, thus creating the illusion that theirs is not in fact a political position, but an extra-ideological stance which perceives liberal democracy simply as the 'natural' status quo. It is in this way, by positing its discourse as non-ideological, that anti-communism contributes to an internalization of the present political order.

Communists are rhetorically not only banished to the 'Other' field of politics, but also from the historical record itself. Critics of the petition pointed out that its rhetoric was strictly undemocratic – the anarchist counter-petition 'One Does Not Speak to Right-Wingers' (which however remained a marginal affair with few signatories), warned that 'we see in zealous anti-communism an effort to get rid of the opposite view, to relegate it to "the edge of society" and in this way create a new totalitarianism'.¹³³ This sentiment was however echoed also by more mainstream commentators. Literary and film scholar and political commentator Jan Čulík, for instance, noted in a BBC interview, in reaction to another anti-

¹³¹ Václav Bělohradský, 'Antipolitika v Čechách: Příspěvek ke gramatice kýče', in *Česká konzervativní a liberální politika*, eds. Petr Fiala and František Mikš (Brno: CDK, 2000), 33-59.

¹³² Slavoj Žižek, 'The Spectre of Ideology', in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1994), 1-33 (19).

¹³³ Jov, 'Petice "S pravičáky se nemluví"' [Petition: "One does not speak to right-wingers"], *Haló noviny*, 4 December 2003, 3.

communist petition from 2005 entitled 'Let's Ban the Communists',¹³⁴ that 'the desire to exclude someone from the nation is totalitarian, Stalinist, and communist'.¹³⁵ These may seem to be strong words in turn; whether or not we agree with the extent of Čulík's assessment, the critique of the anti-communist petitions identifies an exclusionary trope in anti-communist rhetoric, which seeks to eliminate communists not only from the public arena, but also from the past.

This trope was perhaps best expressed in the controversy around David Černý's commission for a memorial to the Czech anti-fascist resistance during World War II in 2004, which was to stand on a green space in Prague's first district. Despite the fact that Černý's proposal had won an open competition, the memorial was in the end designed by Vladimír Preclík, due to a remark that Černý made in an interview with the magazine *Nedělní svět* (Sunday World), in which he claimed that 'a dead communist [is] a good communist'.¹³⁶ The journal did not fail to pick up on the irony that 'David Černý irreconcilably hates communists. Nevertheless, he will soon build hundreds of them a memorial'.¹³⁷ The article thus pointed to the fact that many in the anti-fascist resistance were also communist sympathizers. After Černý's remarks garnered protest from the Czech Union of Freedom Fighters, a World War II veterans' organization, the councillors of Prague's first district voted to hand over the commission to Preclík.¹³⁸ Černý reacted to the decision by saying that it is proof of the fact 'that communists still have a large say in Czech society'.¹³⁹ The sculptor's rhetorical effort to discredit communist anti-fascist resistance is emblematic of a strategy of erasing communism from historical memory, a kind of sanitization of the past, which is reimagined as having taken place without communists – once again an exclusion of this group from the 'we' of democratic Czech society. This trope rests on the presupposition of equating

¹³⁴ *Zakažme komunisty* (Let's Ban the Communists) was the initiative of unaffiliated senator Jaromír Štětina to legislatively ban the use of the word 'communist' from the name of political parties.

Štětina was supported by many of the artists who had initiated 'One Does Not Speak with Communists'. See Lukáš Dolanský, 'Umělci a senátoři chtějí zakázat komunisty' [Artists and senators want to ban the communists], *Lidové noviny*, 8 February 2005, 4.

¹³⁵ Jan Čulík, 'Josef Bouška: "Vy na Západě našemu antikomunismu nikdy nemůžete rozumět"' [Josef Bouška: "You in the West can never understand our anti-communism"], *Britské listy*, 5 October 2005, <http://blisty.cz/art/25267.html>, accessed 26 February 2015.

¹³⁶ jhv, 'Černý: Mrtvý komunista, dobrý komunista' [Černý: A dead communist is a good communist], *Nedělní svět*, 29 August 2004, 1.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ čtk, 'Radnice Prahy 1 nechce pomník obětem odboje od Davida Černého' [Prague 1 council does not want monument to victims of resistance by David Černý], *Lidové noviny*, 5 October 2004, 8.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

communism with fascism, which comes up time and again in public debates on the past. After long discussions about a planned 'Institute of National Memory',¹⁴⁰ the stance would eventually be institutionalized through the setting up of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes in 2007, the mission of which is to study both the Nazi and communist periods, which are both designated 'totalitarian dictatorships'.¹⁴¹

2.5 Anti-communism's shifting object

Throughout the first post-socialist decade and beyond, anti-communism was used as a token of symbolically eliminating the adversary – anyone who did not embrace radical decommunization, and moreover anyone with leftist leanings, could be labelled as calling for a return to the old order, a very common and still used rhetorical move. As Lukáš Valeš notes, this became a convenient tool for right-wing political parties, who could use the 'scarecrow' of a return before 1989 to obscure salient social and economic problems, and position themselves as the saviours of democracy.¹⁴²

To some extent, the discourse of anti-communism also suggests a generational story: on the one hand, the most radical anti-communists were and continue to be the political prisoners of the 1950s, who perceived themselves as the most genuine resistance to the communist regime. The political prisoners found little common ground with the next generation of anti-communist opposition, the dissidents of the 1970s, whom they saw as 'not having known the true face of Bolshevism'.¹⁴³ The rhetoric of 'non-political politics' and human rights of the regime on the part of Charter 77 translated into an inclusive and pluralistic vision of democracy for many of its signatories, where even the voices of (ex-)

¹⁴⁰ Senators from the Civic Democratic Party began to prepare a legislative proposal for the foundation of such an institute in 2005. See čtk, 'Přístup k spisům StB se má rozšířit' [Access to StB files to be broadened], *Právo*, 12 April 2005, 4.

¹⁴¹ See Act 181/2007 Coll. on the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes and the Archive of Security Forces, available on the Institute's website: <http://www.ustrcr.cz/cs/zakon-c-181-2007-sb>, accessed 26 February 2015.

¹⁴² Lukáš Valeš, 'Antikomunismus jako nová politická ideologie?', in *Společenskovední aspekty fenoménu vyrovnání se s minulostí v kontextu výchovy k občanství*, ed. Pavel Kopeček et al. (Prague: Nakladatelství Epoque, 2013), 60-81 (62).

¹⁴³ Pavel Pečínka, 'Politici vězni se cítí opomíjeni' [Political prisoners feel neglected], *Rovnost*, 30 October 1999, 4.

communists could be heard. But yet another group comes into play and shapes post-1989 discourse: the 'second generation' of dissent, often children of Charter signatories, active in underground activities in the 1980s, such as Petr Placák, who subsequently took up an anti-communist activist position, for instance in the 'One Does Not Speak with Communists' campaign.

Anti-communism is thus by no means a unified strategy, as testified by the diversity of the tropes discussed in this chapter, be it the idea of former communists' inability to change, a narrative of externalization of the responsibility for Communist Party rule, a conflation of 'communism' with any form of leftist ideas in general, or a re-casting of victims of persecution as resistance fighters. While many of its proponents, in particular the most engaged 'mnemonic warriors', saw it as a means of building a better post-socialist society, for others anti-communism became an instrumental strategy for pushing other personal or political agendas. Debates would often crystallize around the issue of 'coming to terms with the past' – a phrase which however, like the term 'communist' itself, became increasingly vague and acted as an empty signifier onto which different groups could project their own meanings. In 1998, journalist Adam Drda announced that 'a public debate about communism has not yet happened and we should open it now',¹⁴⁴ yet its specific contents remain opaque. A related term, however, did achieve a more defined meaning: the notion of the 'memory of the nation' was used mainly by the KPV, who positioned themselves as its guardian, and which came to be equated with memories of trauma. The memory of the everyday, on the other hand, seemed to have no place in this national narrative.

Anti-communism defines itself negatively (as apparent already from the term itself); it requires an adversary for its very existence, even if the notion of this adversary has to shift to some extent to maintain its existence. Identification with the status quo happens on the basis of the exclusion of the Other, who can, depending on the particular situation, mean current and former communists, agents and collaborators, or can at other times be externalized completely, in those cases where the communist regime is viewed as a Soviet import. A further manoeuvre uses anti-communism as a means of attacking left-leaning opinions in general. This is supported by two particular tropes: first, an essentialization of

¹⁴⁴ Adam Drda, 'Komunistická minulost není tak docela za námi' [The communist past is not quite behind us], *Lidové noviny*, 7 May 1998, 10.

communism, where, as Koubek and Polášek point out, ‘Stalin and Mao Tse-Tung, Dubček and Gorbachev, Husák and Honecker, Kádár and Gierek’ are all conflated as representatives of the same idea. Second, hand in hand with this strategy goes the levelling of the different historical periods through which state socialism developed, also on the level of legislation. Critics of the 1993 Act on the Illegality of the Communist Regime pointed out that this law equated the protagonists of the Prague Spring with those who then eradicated the architects of the reform during Normalization.¹⁴⁵ A further extension of this logic is the equation of Nazism and communism under the bracket of ‘totalitarianism’¹⁴⁶ – in this way, much of the twentieth century, with the exception of the inter-war First Republic, is relegated to take up the role of undifferentiated evil in Balaščík’s ethical opposition.

In the studied period, anti-communism provided a rhetorical strategy to present contemporary problems as the result of the continuing legacy of the past; hence, we observe a mediascape where critique of the status quo appeared only seldom in mainstream outlets. This was left to the tabloids, which performed it by means of sensationalist and unsubstantiated conspiracy theories.¹⁴⁷ As the following chapters will reveal, the understanding of the socialist past that representations and cultural practices project is predicated on this positioning of the present political order as inherently good. In his satirical essays on postmodernism, writer Jan Stern notes that of the strategies that serve to legitimate this view, ‘surely the most remarkable mythological rhetorical figure is the confusion of democracy and capitalism’.¹⁴⁸ A third part to this terminological equation is added by Holý, who notes that ‘for most Czechs, democracy is first of all

¹⁴⁵ Zdeněk Jičínský, ‘Despekt k pražskému jaru je účelový’ [Disdain for the Prague Spring is calculated], *Právo*, 15 August 1998, 6.

¹⁴⁶ ‘Totalitarianism’ not only as a discursive category, but also as an analytical concept in historiography saw renewed interest in East-Central Europe after the collapse of state socialism (while discussions of this category had been ongoing already prior to that on the other side of the Iron Curtain); see Bianca Hoenig, ‘Možnosti a meze jednoho paradigmatu: Teorie totalitarismu aplikovaná na státní socialismus středovýchodní Evropy’, *Soudobé dějiny* 16, no. 4 (2009), 640-652. Key works of the theory of totalitarianism were translated into Czech in the 1990s, e.g. Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* (published by OIKOYMENH in 1996).

¹⁴⁷ This function was left principally to *Špígl*, which can be seen as the only political tabloid in the Czech Republic. Its main agenda was to bring scandalous news about the activities of political actors. In the early 1990s, the daily *Expres* profiled itself more as a crime and celebrity gossip paper, but was prone to conspiracy theories, for instance in July 1992, it published a long article on the presence of the Illuminati in the Czech Republic (Ladislav Kubic, ‘Illuminati’, *Expres*, 4 – 6 July 1992, 1, 4).

¹⁴⁸ Jan Stern, *Média, psychoanalýza a jiné perverze* (Prague: Malvern, 2006), 214.

coterminous with freedom'.¹⁴⁹ The triumvirate democracy-capitalism-freedom becomes interchangeable and naturalized; thus Karel, the main hero of the soap opera *Vyprávěj*, which in its fourth season portrays the turmoil of building capitalism in the 1990s, proclaims 'it's pretty great we have freedom and democracy', when what he in fact finds to be great is the free market that has allowed him to become an entrepreneur.¹⁵⁰ This positing of liberal democracy on the top of the good-evil axis however, led to the effect, as Balaščík remarks, that 'any negative phenomena (social differences, mafia capitalism, etc.) were from this point of view considered an aberration or one-off defect, rather than a fundamental problem'.¹⁵¹ The fact that anti-communism became a hegemonic discourse in the 1990s and early 2000s in the Czech media precluded other discourses which would allow for a critique of the status quo, as various political, social, and economic problems could be portrayed as a result of the past and insufficient decommunization, turning attention away from the burning issues of the present and the systemic transformations.

As this chapter has shown, together with politicians who exploited this conflation of the triumvirate of democracy, capitalism, and freedom to blame contemporary failures on the socialist past, often it was artists and individuals active in the cultural sphere who championed the discourse of the ethical opposition, and it is no different with the authors and producers of the representations which form the core material of this thesis. Herein then lies the political dimension of Czech representations of socialism: images of the past operate to varying degrees with the basic assumption that the present from which narratives of the past are retrospectively retold is necessarily superior. Is it then meaningful to speak of nostalgia, if the 'lost home' is relegated to the land of evil? Svetlana Boym's dichotomy of nostalgia posits on the one hand a restorative nostalgia that 'attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home',¹⁵² i.e. a real longing for a return to state socialism, while 'reflective nostalgia', on the other hand, can be 'ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary'.¹⁵³ Given the way that the elites have internalized a rejection of the past, as this chapter has argued, it is possible to

¹⁴⁹ Holý, 70.

¹⁵⁰ *Vyprávěj*, 2009-2013, Season 4, Episode 15.

¹⁵¹ Balaščík, 19.

¹⁵² Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xviii.

¹⁵³ Boym, 50.

conclude that on the level of public discourse, there is little evidence for the former kind of nostalgia. The story on the ground amongst voters of the Communist Party will be different, but their voices are not those taken up by the mainstream media nor by representational culture. The ways in which Czech narratives of the socialist past can be seen as engaging with Boym's second, reflective category, and the extent to which 'nostalgia' is an appropriate term to capture this relationship, will be the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 3. The nostalgic moment of 1999: Michal David, *Major Zeman*, and *Pelíšky*

The years immediately following the fall of the socialist regimes in 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe saw an infatuation with Western popular culture, which had for decades remained largely inaccessible. The first nation-wide Czech commercial television station, *Nova*, based its success on broadcasting largely American series and soap operas.¹ In addition, as the previous chapter demonstrated, the decade following the 'Velvet Revolution' was characterized by a strong anti-communist sentiment in the Czech Republic and so it would seem at first glance that a positive memory of the socialist period had little place both in popular culture and public discourse throughout the 1990s. However, a shift began to take place around the year 1998. Andrew Roberts asserts that 'the turning point can be dated almost to the day'.² He is referring to 23 February 1998, when the by then almost forgotten king of Czechoslovak 1980s disco, Michal David, sang to a large crowd on Old Town Square in Prague, on the occasion of the return of the victorious Czech ice hockey team from the Olympic Games in Nagano. An analysis of press articles in the major Czech daily newspapers dealing with this event shows that David's comeback came as a surprise to many and was met with a wave of distaste, mainly because of his strong association with the previous regime, when he was known as the composer of songs for the *spartakiáda*, a heavily politicized mass exercise event.³ Yet his performance was widely publicized.⁴ David's successful re-emergence inspired a number of other pop stars of the previous regime, who soon announced concert tours and new albums, such as the 1980s duo Petr Kotvald and Stanislav Hložek, or pop diva Helena Vondráčková.⁵ Socialist-era pop music thus firmly re-established itself on the Czech music scene.

¹ Andrew Roberts, 'The Politics and Anti-Politics of Nostalgia', *East European Politics & Societies* 16, no. 3 (2002): 764–809 (765).

² Roberts, 766.

³ Vladimír Dušánek and Josef Hymp, 'Stotisícový dav fanoušků přivítal v metropoli své hrdiny z Nagana' [Hundred thousand strong crowd welcomes its heroes from Nagano in the capital], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 24 February 1998 [Supplement 'Praha'], 1; dub, zup, 'Někdo děkoval, jiní agitovali' [Some thanked, others campaigned], *Lidové noviny*, 25 February 1998, 3.

⁴ See, for example, Milena Králová, 'Překvapení ze Staroměstského náměstí' [Surprise from Old Town Square], *Liberecký den*, 24 February 1998, 7; Ondřej Štindl, 'Michal David – principál národních veselí' [Michal David – ringmaster of national celebrations], *Lidové noviny*, 25 February 1998, 3.

⁵ See Ondřej Bezr, 'V začarovaném kruhu' [In a vicious circle], *Týden*, 6 July 1998, 42.

Roberts interprets the revival of socialist-era entertainment as a sign of nostalgia in Czech society. This argument provides a convenient explanation, but does not adequately capture the complex cultural dynamics of these events and requires some qualification. Already the example of David illustrates this well: the singer's comeback, paradoxically, did not come at a point when Czech society was turning back to the socialist period; instead David arrived at a forward-looking moment of national confidence, when the post-socialist state had achieved international recognition through winning a gold medal at the year's largest sporting event. If it is possible to speak about David's re-establishment on the music scene as a manifestation of nostalgia, then such nostalgia cannot easily be interpreted as a symptom of disappointment with the post-socialist period. Furthermore, the genesis of David's comeback points to how a practice that is seemingly nostalgic for socialism is embedded in and generated through market mechanisms. When Olympic hockey team member Jiří Šlégr revealed to the daily *Právo* that he and his teammates listen to Michal David in their dressing room in Nagano,⁶ the marketing potential of this ostensibly innocuous comment was seized upon by the Czech Ice Hockey Association, together with its sponsor Coca-Cola, who asked David to write an 'anthem' to welcome back the victorious team. One of the conditions of the commission was for the lyrics of the song to mention Coca-Cola.⁷ Soon after, David's records experienced increased sales and the singer launched a new album and became a staple on the concert circuit.⁸

Michal David's comeback poses a question about the extent of the ongoing consumption of socialist-era popular culture across the political changes of 1989. Can the revival of socialist popular culture be interpreted as a new, nostalgic phenomenon or does it rather represent a cultural continuity? Do these two interpretations not operate in opposite directions – one turning back to the past, the other looking towards the future? And is it meaningful to speak of 'nostalgia' in relation to practices, which, like the clever marketing of David, are so obviously associated with the politics of their current moment? This chapter will look at

⁶ Čtk, 'V šatně poslouchají Davida' [They listen to David in the dressing room], *Právo*, 20 February 1998, no pagination.

⁷ Anon., 'Michal David zpívá o coca-cole, protože její výrobce patří mezi sponzory hokeje' [Michal David sings about Coca-Cola because its manufacturer ranks among the sponsors of ice-hockey], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 25 February 1998, 4.

⁸ Vladimír Vlasák, 'Které nahrávky se nejlépe prodávají' [Which records are selling best], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 28 February 1998, no pagination; Markéta Kučerová-Turková, 'Fosílie, nebo hit?' [A fossil or a hit?], *Týden*, 6 July 1998, 40-45.

several events in the late 1990s which re-invigorated the cultural memory of the socialist period with both positive and negative valences. On the one hand, comedy films about the period enjoyed popularity, while the broadcast of a 1970s television series or the comebacks of socialist-era entertainers sparked vocal criticism in the media. I argue that while certain forms of nostalgia certainly did play a role in this period, the framework of nostalgia alone does not provide satisfactory vocabularies to capture the controversies and political rejection of the period so prevalent in mainstream discourse and witnessed also in this cultural revival. A more nuanced typology of the cultural responses to, and legacies of, state socialism is thus necessary. In this chapter, I suggest 'retro' as a designation for a particularly salient response to the past in the Czech context, which bridges both an aesthetic fascination with the past and a dismissal of its politics.

The category of cultural continuity between the socialist and post-socialist periods has received relatively little attention and opinions remain divided to what extent it can be termed nostalgic. The large body of literature on German *Ostalgie* does not address this question, as the wave of nostalgia for the GDR has been conceptualized as a reaction to a definite break with the socialist past, particularly in terms of a loss of a specifically East German identity. While this sense of identity loss was exacerbated by the dissolution of the GDR through its integration into the West German state, in the Czech context, political and legal continuities between the pre- and post-1989 periods are much more evident.⁹ The question of cultural continuity thus also becomes pertinent and in this chapter I propose that it is one of the features that differentiates Czech nostalgia from its German counterpart. Writing about the Czech context, Martin Franc is doubtful whether such continuity can meaningfully be seen as nostalgic on the basis that for popular singers such as Michal David or Karel Gott, 'the year 1989 does not represent a significant break in their production. The direct connection with a particular period, which is considered the basis for a possible ostalgie reception appears, therefore, somewhat blurred'.¹⁰ Buildig on Franc's

⁹ For discussions of legal continuity, see Chapter 2 of Françoise Mayer, *Les Tchèques et leur communisme. Mémoire et identités politiques* (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2004).

¹⁰ Martin Franc, 'Ostalgie v Čechách', in *Kapitoly z dějin české demokracie po roce 1989*, ed. Adéla Gjuričová and Michal Kopeček (Prague and Litomyšl: Paseka, 2008), 193-216, (202-203).

observation, in my reading, cultural continuity is essential to the temporal narrative that retro constructs.

This chapter will explore the mechanics and politics of re-visiting the past through the continuation of certain cultural practices and the re-creation of the past through representation. I will move towards establishing a typology of the Czech memory of socialism as expressed in cultural production and its reception by closely analysing the textual mechanisms used to evoke the past, as well as accompanying reading strategies. Building on Svetlana Boym's influential differentiation between reflective and restorative nostalgia,¹¹ I question the dichotomies with which established typologies of nostalgia often operate. The case studies in this chapter give rise to multiple reading strategies which cannot easily be divided into binary oppositions. While Czech cultural responses to the past do operate with a number of pairings – such as mood and mode, kitsch and camp, quality and irony – these oppositions are not mutually exclusive, but can interact within a single text and its reception. Nostalgia is here conceptualized not as a characteristic of representations or practices, but as a set of mechanisms which representations and practices employ to trigger positive valuations of particular, specific aspects of the past, rather than the period as a whole. It is rather the choice of genre that significantly shapes the emotional and political resonances of the past.

To contextualize, the chapter will detail the ways in which the socialist past was represented in literature and film throughout the 1990s. I will then outline the public debates surrounding the continuity of socialist-era entertainment, before moving on to present a case study of two events that occurred in conjunction, creating what I term a 'nostalgic moment' in 1999: the release of Jan Hřebejk's popular and well-received retro comedy *Pelíšky* (Cosy Dens, dir. Jan Hřebejk, Czech Republic, 1999) and the re-screening of the 1970s television series *Třicet případů majora Zemana* (The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman, dir. Jiří Sequens, 1974–1979) on the public broadcaster, Czech Television, for the first time since the fall of the communist regime.

¹¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xviii.

3.1 Ways of speaking: representing socialism in the 1990s

Two films produced in the early 1990s set the tone for retrospectively portraying the socialist past: *Tankový prapor* (The Tank Battalion, dir. Vít Olmer, 1991) and *Černí baroni* (Black Barons, dir. Zdeněk Sirový, 1992). Both were much anticipated and discussed in the press not only for being adaptations of popular literary texts (*Tankový prapor* was based on the eponymous novel by Josef Škvorecký, while Miloslav Švandrlík's stories served as a template for *Černí baroni*), but also because they were amongst the first films in Czechoslovakia to be produced by private production companies and to be accompanied by a 'Western' marketing campaign.¹² Both films are comedies set in a military environment in the 1950s, and view the period benignly, if not overtly nostalgically, depicting the hardships of service in the army with humorous exaggeration. Few commentators remarked on how these films engaged with the past. Only *Černí baroni* elicited some unease from reviewers regarding the humorous portrayal of the Auxiliary Technical Battalions,¹³ which provided the setting for the film. One reviewer expressed concern that the jovial vision of the 1950s would create an objectionable myth about Czech history.¹⁴ Others had doubts as to whether comedy was a dignified enough vehicle to do justice to conscripts who were forced to carry out hard labour in the harsh conditions of the Battalions.¹⁵

The comic nature of these two popular films set a precedent for portraying the socialist past in Czech culture; comedy becomes the dominant genre in which socialism is set until the 'dramatic turn' of the second half of the 2000s (discussed in chapter 5). While some film and television representations of the 1990s did attempt to engage with the socialist period through less light-hearted modes, these were not met with popular response.¹⁶ Significantly, both films chose to tackle

¹² See Agáta Pilátová, 'Filmová show po česku' [Film show the Czech way], *Právo lidu*, 6 June 1991, 4; Martin Nezval, 'Tankový prapor' [The Tank Battalion], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 13 May 1991, 4; Jaroslav Kopic, 'Černí baroni ze soukromých peněz' [Black Barons from private money], *Noviny*, 19 July 1992, x.

¹³ Auxiliary Technical Battalions were special units of the Czechoslovak People's Army that conscripted those who had committed political offences to carry out hard labour, often in uranium mines. The harsh conditions in these battalions witnessed their most celebrated literary representation in Milan Kundera's 1967 novel *Žert* (The Joke).

¹⁴ Jan Jaroš,-----, *Zemědělské noviny*, 1 June 1992, no pagination.

¹⁵ See Alexandra Prošnicová, 'Paradoxy Černých baronů' [Paradoxes of the Black Barons], *Noviny*, 25 June 92, 9.

¹⁶ Jan Čulík argues that 'a cathartic testimony to "what we lived in" interested practically no one in the new situation: films with similar [Normalization] subject matter were suddenly considered

traumatic topics in Czechoslovak history, which in terms of their content only would easily lend themselves to a serious or even tragic depiction. Instead, however, the films set up a narrative structure which suspends trauma; unpleasant aspects of authoritarian rule are glossed over in order to emphasize the comic absurdities of the period, which is cast as farce. The comic mode affords a sense of detachment; it employs what Michael Mulkey calls different 'plausibility requirements'¹⁷ in comparison with the serious mode. Such a mode of slight exaggeration enables representations to focus on the comedy of characterization – *Černí baroni* is full of larger-than-life comic characters, most memorably perhaps Miroslav Donutil's lisping *politruk* Troník or Pavel Landovský's simple-minded Major Terazky – while eliding large historical events. The locus of many comedic representations of socialism thus became the private, be it the family, the peer group, or a specific subculture, such as that of the Auxiliary Technical Battalions, thus continuing in the tradition of Normalization-era entertainment.¹⁸

This foregrounding of private narratives and strong comic characters is also a strategy employed by Michal Viewegh in his novel *Báječná léta pod psa* (Wonderful Years that Sucked), published in 1992, the same year that *Černí baroni* premiered in cinemas. Focusing on the period of so-called Normalization of the 1970s and 1980s, the novel too plays out as a comedy, but in comparison to the films above, it adopts a wistful, at times nostalgic tone for youth gone by. *Báječná léta*, which Viewegh published at the age of thirty, was heralded as the voice of a

inanimate, they fell into oblivion and today hardly anyone remembers them'. As examples, he gives *Ta naše písnička česká II* (Our Czech Song II, dir. Vít Olmer, 1990) or *Byli jsme to my?* (Was it us?, dir. Antonín Máša, 1990). See Jan Čulík, *Jací jsme*, 50. An example of a commercially unsuccessful film which attempted to tackle seriously the topic of communist prison camps was *Bumerang* (Boomerang, dir. Hynek Bočan, 1997), based on a novel by former political prisoner Jiří Stránský. See Petra Dominiková, "'We Have Democracy, Don't We?'" Czech Society as Reflected in Contemporary Czech Cinema', in *Past For the Eyes: East European Representations of Communism in Cinema and Museums after 1989*, eds. Oksana Sarkisova and Péter Apor (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), 215-244 (220). The only representational artefacts that cast state socialism as trauma and enjoyed success in the 1990s were the first season of the TV series *Zdivočelá země* (A Land Gone Wild, dir. Hynek Bočan, 1997; 12 episodes, watched by a total of approx. 2 900 000 adult viewers) and the series *Konec velkých prázdnin* (The End of the Long Vacation, dir. Miloslav Luther, 1996; 6 episodes, watched by a total of approx. 2 800 000 viewers), which dealt with the topic of emigration. Ratings data source: Czech Television diary research [Deníčkový výzkum ČT], Czech Television Archive.

¹⁷ Michael Mulkey, *On Humour: Its Nature and Place in Modern Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 17.

¹⁸ Paulina Bren convincingly argues that the most popular genre of the Normalization era – the TV serial – was largely invested in the private. See Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism After the 1968 Prague Spring* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010).

generation that could look back at the period of its youth and adolescence with self-deprecating irony. This ironic approach arises from Viewegh's retrospective narrative strategy, as he recounts late socialism through an older version of the precocious child, and later aspiring novelist, Kvido.

The discrepancy between the adult and childhood view is expressed already in the title of Viewegh's novel. On the one hand, the years of Kvido's childhood and adolescence are filled with pleasant memories – *báječná léta*, or *wonderful years*. On the other hand, they also took place in the difficult period of late socialism – hence *léta pod psa*, or *years that sucked*. The tension between these two positions provides Viewegh with a source of humour, as the juxtaposition of a narrative of the past with a retrospective present view reveals various comic incongruities. Beginning with the father's demotion from the progressive economic institute where he works after the political crackdown of the late 1960s, through the family's forced move to a provincial town, the father's inability to secure adequate housing and eventual mental breakdown, Viewegh chronicles how political pressures prevented the family from leading the 'normal' life that the mother in the novel longs for so arduously. But though the parents' view, which is aware of how their reality is limited by political pressures, is presented, it is always mediated through the eyes of Kvido, who looks back at the time as primarily that of his largely happy childhood and adolescence. Viewegh's narrative thus generates a nostalgic tone which finds its locus in one of the most frequent tropes employed by retrospective representations of socialism – that of childhood or teenage reminiscence, which lends itself easily to setting up both a wistful mood of longing for youth gone by, as well as a sense of distance crucial for comic portrayals.

While this nostalgia is invested in the private, the humour of the text arises from the juxtaposition of this private sphere with larger, public events, or as Pavol Minár puts it, the '*small histories* of human life amidst the *large histories* of historical events'.¹⁹ Structurally, this effect is furthered by the use of a politically innocent child protagonist, who does not necessarily perceive the wider political implications of everyday occurrences. These, however, are known to the adult characters, as well as the reader, who can thus ironically appreciate the young hero's naïveté. Thus for little Kvido, knocking down the portrait of President Husák

¹⁹ Pavol Minár, 'Poznámky k čítaniu textov Michala Viewegha Názory na vraždu a Báječná léta pod psa', *Česká literatura* 44, no. 3 (1996): 294-301 (299).

in a game of skittles at school is an unfortunate accident; for his cautious father, it is a deliberate political provocation on the part of his son. The incongruity of the child and the adult view is a source of a comic misunderstanding in this scene. The use of a young protagonist is widespread in Czech nostalgic representations: virtually all such texts employ the structuring device of a child's political innocence to achieve comic effects and to create private, everyday narratives.

Viewegh's comic depiction of Normalization received very positive reviews. At a time when condemnation of the previous regime ruled public debates, Viewegh's tackling of the socialist period with humour and detachment was welcomed by literary critics. Pavel Janáček, for example, remarks that the novel offers not just entertainment, but also 'a feeling of relief that events and attitudes, conventionally circumscribed by a complex of seriousness, have been treated as a *buffonerie*'.²⁰ To an extent this echoes the text accompanying the DVD edition of *Černí baroni*: '(...) a proof that even in the 1950s, when smiles were hard to come by, there were still many things to laugh at'.²¹ Jiří Tyl goes even further, finding an almost carnivalesque sense of release in being able to laugh at the period: 'Viewegh's liberated laughter is contagious – the opportunity to laugh at all of that is a true asset (...)'.²² *Báječná léta* is thus a significant text for the development of the generic repertoires employed to portray socialism, in that it provided new, humorous vocabularies to speak about the past.

The term nostalgia was not invoked in contemporary reviews of Viewegh's novel; Vladimír Novotný, however, entitled his review in the daily *Mladá fronta Dnes* 'Docela báječné retro' (A quite wonderful retro). This is not the first time that the term 'retro' appeared in Czech post-socialist journalistic discourse: it was previously mentioned, for example, in reviews of Jan Svěrák's 1991 film *Obecná škola* (The Elementary School), set in the early post-war years,²³ or in relation to Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966).²⁴ Retro did not therefore bear associations with the socialist period in particular. Indeed, as Elizabeth Guffey has

²⁰ Pavel Janáček, 'Groteska o velké lásce' [A grotesque about great love], *Nové knihy*, 25 November 1992, 1.

²¹ Zdeněk Sirový (director, screenwriter) and Miloslav Švandrlík (screenwriter), *Černí baroni* [DVD booklet]. Czechoslovakia, Space Films, 1992.

²² Jiří Tyl, 'Autorský subjekt jako osvoboditel (sebe sama)' [The authorial subject as liberator (of himself)], *Iniciály* 4, no. 36 (1993): 25-26 (26).

²³ Sdk, 'Svěrákovské retro' [Svěrákian retro], *Lidové noviny*, 23 February 1991, 8.

²⁴ R. Starý, 'Ještě jedno nostalgické retro' [One more nostalgic retro], *Prostor* 4, no. 15 (1991), 137-139.

shown, the term, as a way of referring to a particular way of utilizing the aesthetics of the past, developed within Anglo-American and Francophone culture in the 1960s, when it was used to describe the Art Nouveau revival in the UK and the USA, as well as a group of films known as the *mode rétro* in France, which turned back to representing the Second World War.²⁵ Novotný's use of the word in the title of his review is thus telling for two reasons. Firstly, it situates the way Viewegh appropriates and deals with the past outside of the post-socialist setting and within a wider trend in what could be termed Western culture. Secondly, if, as Guffey argues, retro's 'most enduring quality is its ironic stance,'²⁶ then Viewegh's novel certainly falls into this category.

The nostalgia of *Báječná léta* thus shares certain characteristics with a retro mode as it has been theorized within discourses of the postmodern. Paul Grainge notes that 'retro is the word that perhaps best describes versions of postmodern nostalgia: playful, ironic, and where the past is a storehouse of fashion'.²⁷ Retro is concerned with surface and style; it is, as Guffey notes, 'a non-historical way of knowing the past'.²⁸ It thus exemplifies what Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson have both differently expressed as postmodern culture's lack of engagement with history – as a 'void' of history and politics, or a lack of 'historicity' respectively.²⁹ In such theorizations, as Grainge summarizes, 'historicity has been replaced by a new aesthetic "nostalgia mode." This describes an art language where the past is realized through stylistic connotation and consumed as pastiche'.³⁰ I will thus be using retro to signify a postmodern version of nostalgia, which is characterized by its irony and is 'divorced from any necessary, or properly existential, sense of longing, loss, or even memory'.³¹

While retro has been primarily discussed using examples from visual texts, Viewegh's postmodern narrative techniques serve well to exemplify the link

²⁵ See Elizabeth E. Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), in particular Chapter 1.

²⁶ Guffey, 20.

²⁷ Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Style in Retro America* (Westport and London: Praeger, 2002), 54.

²⁸ Guffey, 20.

²⁹ See Jean Baudrillard, 'History: A Retro Scenario', in Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 43-48; and Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), in particular 19.

³⁰ Grainge, 6.

³¹ *Ibid.*

between nostalgia, retro, and the postmodern. *Báječná léta* displays several significant characteristics of postmodern stylistic repertoires: an imitation of various styles and forms (Kvido's diaries, scripted scenes) and multiple layers of self-reflexivity (Kvido's childhood narrative as told from the retrospective perspective of an adult Kvido, the meta-narrative of Kvido discussing his manuscript with his editor, the inclusion of the plot of one of Viewegh's own earlier novellas as Kvido's first literary attempt). Viewegh engages with these postmodern forms explicitly; in his next novel *Výchova dívek v Čechách* (Bringing up Girls in Bohemia) he openly stylizes himself as a postmodern writer.³² In *Báječná léta*, these techniques are employed to ironically gloss historical events and to foreground the comic potential of the private.

The case of Viewegh shows that Czech retro is not an isolated phenomenon arising only out of a specifically post-socialist situation; it resonates with wider practices across Western culture, and it engages with them deliberately. Thus, while discourses of postmodernism have not played a significant role in discussions of German *Ostalgie*, their relation to post-socialist modes of dealing with the past in the Czech context is particularly pertinent. *Báječná léta*'s ironic comedy foreshadowed the direction Czech post-socialist representations of the previous regime would take throughout the 1990s and 2000s: a retro mode, which foregrounds style, whether visual or written, over an engagement with historical knowledge, choosing instead to gloss over great events with small, private, and often comic concerns, viewed with a playful detachment.

Fredric Jameson has bemoaned postmodern nostalgia's lack of historicity, arguing that cultural artefacts such as the 'nostalgia film' have given up on efforts to represent historical content, replacing it instead with a stylized 'pastness'.³³ Yet Jameson's framework does not take into account that in certain contexts precisely this deliberate elision of grand historical narratives can be viewed as politically significant. In the early 1990s in the Czech Republic, Viewegh's escape from the seriousness of vilifying the communist regime that was happening elsewhere in the public sphere was perceived as an important move towards coming to terms with the past. *Báječná léta pod psa* was to an extent read as a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – as a text which brought a more nuanced and rounded

³² Michal Viewegh, *Výchova dívek v Čechách* (Prague: Český spisovatel, 1994).

³³ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 19.

view of the period.³⁴ Contemporary reviews appreciated Viewegh's ability to reclaim the spaces of everyday experience, which were necessarily affected by political pressures on some level but at the same time afforded a platform for those *wonderful years* of the title to take place.

Báječná léta was closely followed in 1993 and 1994 by a series of newly published as well as reissued short stories by Petr Šabach, who employs a number of similar techniques to Viewegh. Reviewers remarked on his affinity with the latter, highlighting his comedic approach to the past and ironizing stance.³⁵ Though less concerned with style and self-reflexivity, Šabach's episodic narratives play on the same juxtaposition of adult and childhood views of the period. Adopting an at times faux-naïve child's perspective, the retrospective narration once again generates humour in relation to (de)politicized everyday occurrences, creating a nostalgic mood through a longing for childhood innocence, which is at the same time comically tempered by the politically informed adult view.

Šabach achieved widespread recognition when his short story *Šakalí léta* (Jackal Years) from his 1986 collection *Jak potopit Austrálii* (How to sink Australia) was used as a basis by screenwriter Petr Jarchovský for Jan Hřebejk's 1993 musical comedy *Šakalí léta* (Jackal Years, dir. Jan Hřebejk, 1993). The film, set at the end of the 1950s in Prague's Dejvice neighbourhood, was met with mixed reviews. As in the case of *Černí baroni* and *Tankový prapor*, responses to the film focused mainly on questions of genre, in this case that of the musical. The choice of this particular genre enabled Hřebejk to employ a stylized aesthetic, evoking the 1950s through rich-coloured costumes juxtaposed with a homely neighbourhood feel (Fig. 3). Reviewers passed little comment on how the film engaged with the period it was set in; however, when they did, they felt that it failed on this account.³⁶ Jiří Peňás, for example, criticized the use of historical detail as a mere aesthetic backdrop: 'the whole period of red neck scarves, sputniks, and architecture in the style of socialist realism served as a splendid decoration for "a pretty good blast"'.³⁷

³⁴ Vladimír Karfík, 'Báječná léta pod psa', *Literární noviny* 4, no. 10 (1993), 7.

³⁵ See, for example, Pavel Šrut, 'Nemusí hořet – stačí, když doutná' [It needn't burn – smouldering is enough], *Lidové noviny* [Sunday supplement], 4 February 1995, 10; and Jů, 'Hovno prý hoří' [Shit allegedly burns], *Labyrint revue*, no. 1 (1995), 4.

³⁶ See Andrej Halada, 'Proč a jak (ne)točit v Čechách muzikál' [Why and how (not) to film a musical in the Czech Republic], *Mladý svět* 4, no. 51 (1993), 54; or, Ludmila Korecká, 'Šakalí léta' [Jackal Years], *Mladá fronta Dnes* [Magazín Dnes], 9 December 1993, 26-27.

³⁷ Jiří Peňás, 'V čem se dobře cítí humorista aneb ráj plandavosti' [Where a humorist feels good, or, the paradise of looseness], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 10 January 1995, 19.



Figure 3. *Šakalí léta* (Jackal Years). Jan Hřebejk (director, screenwriter) and Petr Jarchovský (screenwriter), 1993.

Šabach's original story 'Šakalí léta' was published in 1986. Turning to the late 1950s, the nostalgia of the narrative does not require the political break of the Velvet Revolution to be effective – it finds its locus purely in youthful reminiscence, the period of the 1950s being sufficiently distant in terms of atmosphere and its material universe to warrant such a return. Šabach emphasizes the period's *pastness*, its social rituals now obsolete: 'In those times, when people would spit at a kiss in public, Bejby and his sweetheart unashamedly kissed on every corner. And how they kissed!'³⁸ Hřebejk's film however adds another dimension to Šabach's nostalgia for a time long gone. Termed a retro-musical by several critics, the film is primarily concerned with an aestheticization of the period, relishing such details as the main character Bejby's platform shoes or semi-acoustic guitar. In an essay published in the daily *Lidové noviny*, Zdenko Pavelka was the only critic to remark on the film's engagement with postmodern modes of representation. As evidence, he quotes the degree of stylization, the use of symbols, a disjointed narrative, and, most significantly, the fact that 'the benchmark for the reconstruction of the period setting is not exact historical accuracy, but an approximate resemblance in combination with the conception of

³⁸ 'V těchto časech, kdy si lidi uplivali před veřejnou pusou, se Bejby se svým miláčkem bezostyšně líbali na každém rohu. A jak se líbali!'. Petr Šabach, *Jak potopit Austrálii* (Prague and Litomyšl: Paseka 1999), 46.

the authors and the viewers, who (mostly) do not remember the period, or experienced it as children'.³⁹ Pavelka has thus captured an important principle of the retro aesthetic so prevalent in Czech cinematic and televisual representations: it represents the past, but does not strive to recreate it with an eye to accurately capturing historical detail.

As a postmodern phenomenon, retro chooses markers of the past which also appeal to contemporary aesthetic tastes. Visually, *retrochic*, as Raphael Samuel terms it, 'plays with the idea of the period look, while remaining determinedly of the here-and-now'.⁴⁰ It thus produces a pastiche of styles – or, as Richard Dyer puts it, 'a kind of imitation that you are meant to know is an imitation'⁴¹ – which connotes pastness, while at the same time retaining a fashionable present-day appeal. In visual texts, this is often most apparent in costume design: in the case of *Šakalí léta*, while the shapes and cuts of the 1950s are quoted and reproduced, materials will often employ a wider and fuller colour palette than would have been available at the time to create a more contemporary look (Fig. 4). *Šakalí léta* is a strong example of this kind of retro aesthetic; its genre lends itself particularly well to hyperbole and visual spectacle.



Figure 4. *Šakalí léta* (Jackal Years). Jan Hřebejk (director, screenwriter) and Petr Jarchovský (screenwriter), 1993.

³⁹ Zdenko Pavelka, 'Šakalí past' [Jackal trap], *Lidové noviny* ['Echo' supplement], 19 March 1994, 1.

⁴⁰ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 83

⁴¹ Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 1.

The over-the-top aesthetic of Hollywood musicals has often been associated with camp.⁴² The Hollywood musical is a reference point for *Šakalí léta*, and the term can thus also be effectively applied to the film's retro look, if understood, together with Susan Sontag, as 'a certain mode of aestheticism. It is *one* way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization'.⁴³ What a text like *Šakalí léta* shares with Viewegh's novel is a participation in postmodern modes, through a foregrounding of stylistic mechanisms, which are less interested in accurately portraying historical content as they are in paying attention to self-reflexive textual detail or visual aestheticization. The past, whether dealt with in a retro mode or not, can of course only be apprehended through the lens of the present. A retro way of seeing is however characterized by 'a more acute sensitivity (...) to the fact that access to the past is never direct or natural but realized through a complex history of representations.'⁴⁴

However, not all representations in the 1990s turned to socialism through postmodern retro devices and camp visuals. A significant film of the period was the box-office success *Kolja* (Kolya, dir. Jan Svěrák, 1996), which was awarded an Academy Award for Best Foreign language Film. While *Kolja* was also hailed as a retro-film,⁴⁵ its participation in retro modes is less clear than in the case of the previously discussed texts. The lapse of time between the narrative presence of *Šakalí léta* and the film's making enables a clear stylistic differentiation of the past, but in the case of *Kolja*, the time gap is much narrower and stylized retro markers are thus much less apparent. Set in the final months of the socialist regime in 1989, the film returns to a period only seven years previously, of which the majority of contemporary viewers would have had clear memories. In this case, the Velvet Revolution serves as a definite historical and structural break, which allows a narrative set so recently to indicate pastness. Lucie Štaudová for example remarks on how the film highlights what has changed in the period since

⁴² See, for example, Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 140–141.

⁴³ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 1994), 277.

⁴⁴ Grainge, 55.

⁴⁵ See, for example, (spa), 'Jan Svěrák našel hrdinu svého nového filmu v Moskvě' [Jan Svěrák found the hero of his new film in Moscow], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 18 August 1995, 16; or, ham, 'Otcovství starého mládence' [The fatherhood of a bachelor], *Večerník Praha*, 16 May 1996, 13.

the Revolution.⁴⁶ 'Retro' was thus used by reviewers as a generic term to connote a narrative set in the past, without reference to its postmodern dimension.

Critical attention to the portrayal of the period, however, was largely drowned out in a response to the strong emotional charge of the film.⁴⁷ Detailing the development of a tender bond between an ageing bachelor and his unexpected adoptive child, the five-year-old Russian boy Kolja, the film employs the narrative techniques of classical Hollywood cinema to achieve its affective goals, which are furthered through its lovable child protagonist, a stylized colour palette which endows all images with a warm golden light, and a soaring orchestral score. The mood of *Kolja* is thus sentimental rather than nostalgic. This sentiment turns not so much to the socialist past itself, as to the moment of its overcoming: the emotional highpoint of the film is the Velvet Revolution. Yet the film does engage with nostalgic strategies. Firstly, the picture is narrated with an unobtrusive, kind-hearted [*laskavý*] humour,⁴⁸ characteristic of the work of screenwriter Zdeněk Svěrák, which creates a predominantly benign portrayal of the period. Thus, as his son, director Jan Svěrák, noted in an interview, even the repressive aspects of the communist regime are depicted with humorous detachment, such as the character of the secret police interrogator, whose threatening persona is comically deflated when he gets his hand awkwardly stuck to a roll of adhesive tape.⁴⁹ On a visual level, the camera filter envelopes the period setting, both physically and figuratively, in a golden glow (Fig. 5). Furthermore, it is the socialist setting itself which allows the narrative to unfold: the main protagonist Louka only comes to take care of Kolja because his mother has emigrated to the other side of the Iron Curtain – once the communist regime falls, the boy is immediately reunited with her. It is thus socialism which enables Louka to experience some of the strongest and most tender moments of his life, while the Revolution disrupts this idyll.

⁴⁶ Lucie Štaudová, 'Dojemný film otce a syna Svěrákových míří do kin' [Touching film of Svěrák father and son hits cinemas], *Denní telegraf*, 15 May 1996, 11.

⁴⁷ See Mirka Spáčilová, 'Hezký český Kolja se netají tím, že se chce líbit' [Nice Czech Kolya does not hide he wants to please], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 16 May 1996, 19; or, Jana Ovsíková, 'Rodinný tandem Svěráků ve filmové akci' [The Svěrák family tandem in action], *Práce*, 22 August 1995, 1.

⁴⁸ Svěrák earned praise for this particular kind of humour from reviewer Oxana Tulajdanová. See Oxana Tulajdanová, 'Nestyďte se za slzy, očistí vaši duši' [Don't be ashamed of your tears, they will cleanse your soul], *Lidové noviny*, 16 May 1996, 11.

⁴⁹ Jan Foll, 'Pozlacení, absurdita a rozšlapané autíčko' [Gilding, absurdity, and a stepped-on toy car – interview with Jan Svěrák], *Lidové noviny* ['Národní 9' supplement], 11 May 1996, xiii.



Figure 5. *Kolja* (Kolya). Jan Svěrák (director) and Zdeněk Svěrák (screenwriter), 1996.

Yet there is no question in *Kolja* that the narrative moves towards the overthrowing of socialism. The film does not shy away from depicting the unpleasant aspects of the period – the cellist Louka is prevented from playing with the Czech Philharmonic for political reasons; he is interrogated by the secret police and has a hostile encounter with social services. At the same time, the film shows how well Louka deals with all of this through acts of minor, personal resistance.

The depiction of ideas of heroism in representations of socialism is key to the kind of political interpretation they convey, which is facilitated by choice of genre. The comic aspects of *Kolja* touch upon what will become a significant trope in Czech representations of the period, which I term ‘petty heroism’. This is a longing for a time when there was clearly something to fight against and when even a sub-standard joke could make an individual a temporary, local hero, because the joke itself, rather than necessarily its content, constituted an act of resistance. Humour can represent an attempt at heroism, which in turn evokes a nostalgia for this heroism in retrospective depictions. At the same time, an initially non-comic attempt at heroism inevitably results in comedy. An example is when Louka (heroically) tells his student/erotic interest Blanka that he will not be putting up flags in his windows for the upcoming Communist Party anniversary. The impulse of nostalgia for heroism and its political resonance thus lies in a self-

congratulatory mode in which the viewer, together with the characters who drive the narrative, revels in how well they managed to set themselves against communist authority. However, faced by the unexpected situation of having to take care of the child of an emigrée and thus potentially attracting the interest of the secret police, Louka's heroic gesture fails: he decides to conform and put up the flags after all with the words 'I'm a coward'.⁵⁰ His failure achieves its final deflation when Louka is in bed with Blanka, and Kolja unexpectedly enters the room, unveiling the flags in the window with a loud bang of the blinds. The moral compromises of the period are thus treated with a humorous distancing.

The sentimental charge of the film as well as the kind of moral apologetics it offers in its portrayal of the period elicited a response which introduced a new term into Czech discussions of depictions of the past: kitsch. The filmmakers anticipated this accusation would be levelled at their picture; several articles quoted Zdeněk Svěrák's defence that 'the fact that this story touches us – and it really does touch us – does not necessarily mean it has something to do with kitsch. It's only an expression of our emotions'.⁵¹ Critic Jiří Peňás was, however, of a different opinion. His complaint with the film is based on the facile *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* it offers: 'Kitsch begins with an easy, uncritical self-identification. For example, in the moment when we recognize ourselves in the sympathetic protagonist of an all but flawless film and we are touched by this, for we have once again confirmed how infinitely humane and full of the most sympathetic qualities we are'.⁵² Peňás refers here not so much to kitsch as an aesthetic property, as he does to a particular emotional response famously defined by Milan Kundera in his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Kundera's oft-quoted example of kitsch, which Peňás himself invokes, is that of the two metaphorical tears that flow in quick succession when seeing children running on the grass. The observer is moved twice: first at the sight of the children, and immediately after, he or she is moved at the thought of being moved, 'together with all mankind',⁵³ by the sight of children running on the grass. According to Kundera,

⁵⁰ 'Jsem srab'. *Kolja*, 1996.

⁵¹ Senta Tesárová, 'Kolja i po několika týdnech v kinech neustále vyprodán' [Kolja still sold out even after weeks in cinemas], *Zemědělské noviny*, 5 June 1996, 14.

⁵² Jiří Peňás, 'Ekránové sny o sobě samých' [Screen dreams about ourselves], *Respekt*, 20 May 1996, 19.

⁵³ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 244.

'it is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch'.⁵⁴ Through a sentimentalized gaze then, *Kolja* evokes a private narrative like the previous representations discussed. However, the film further finds a cosy feeling of moral exculpation in this privacy: identifying with the protagonist Louka, the viewer can congratulate him or herself that they too had lived through the period in commendable ways, making kitsch into one of the modes of dealing with the socialist past.

The first years of the 1990s thus saw a variety of cultural texts that set out different ways of retrospectively speaking about Czech socialism. A number of common tropes becomes apparent. Although, as mentioned in chapter 2, some dramatic representations of socialism were attempted, most frequently, comedic mechanisms were employed to create a gentle, non-threatening image of the period. The structural device of childhood reminiscence allowed these texts to invest nostalgia into an ostensibly non-political arena and to thus recuperate the sphere of everyday occurrences and rituals under socialism. Where the reader or viewer does not directly partake of the child's gaze, a child protagonist is looked *at*, as in the case of *Kolja*, thus also moving the narrative towards a certain political innocence. In the film, this is exemplified by Louka and Kolja's deliberate escape from politics and into the privacy of holiday-making when they leave Prague after a particularly disagreeable encounter with social services.

Based on these representations from the 1990s, it is possible to begin to establish several trends in Czech depictions of socialism, which can be applied to later texts and practices. On the one hand, the return to the past can be connoted through a set of stylistic retro mechanisms. The postmodern mode is contrasted with the affective strategies of narratives like *Kolja*, or, to an extent, the texts of Petr Šabach. Paul Grainge effectively captures this difference when he identifies a distinction between sentiment and style or what he terms 'mood' and 'mode'.⁵⁵ According to Grainge, 'the nostalgia mood is principally defined in relation to a concept of loss (...). By contrast, the nostalgia mode has no necessary relation to loss or longing. As a commodified style, the nostalgia mode has developed, principally within postmodern theory, a theoretical association with amnesia'.⁵⁶ The nostalgia mood, with its sense of yearning for something long gone, is thus

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Grainge, 20.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 21.

easily evoked through the portrayal of childhood or adolescence. The nostalgia mode, on the other hand, ironizes this yearning. Grainge's framework can be further developed by introducing two aesthetic mechanisms with which this mood and mode operate: kitsch and camp. While kitsch is employed by the affective mood, camp exemplifies the style of retro. It thus becomes apparent that representations made in the 1990s operate in complex ways, yet the opposition set up between these two stylistic repertoires is not a binary one. The distinction between mood and mode is particularly productive in that these are not static categories within which representations are to be grouped, but rather strategies adopted by texts. What I thus aim to demonstrate later in this chapter is that this opposition is not mutually exclusive, but can comfortably coexist within one text or practice, forming multi-layered and complex responses.

3.2 The controversies of cultural continuity

Insofar as nostalgia could be witnessed in the 1990s, it largely manifested in aspects of retrospective representations, which attempted to recreate, narratively and visually, the socialist period. However, a different trend begins to emerge later in the decade. With Michal David's comeback after the Nagano Games, it is possible to speak of the social practice of the re-established popularity and consumption of socialist popular culture from the 1960s and thereafter. However, the question of whether this practice can be read as nostalgic is complicated by the fact that the events launched by Michal David's performance on Old Town Square elicited a very strong dismissive reaction. A number of commentators in the daily press, who had built their reputation on their anti-communist credentials, launched vociferous and at times aggressive debates on the merits of socialist popular culture. A highly publicized case of the early 2000s was music critic Jan Rejžek's accusation that singer Helena Vondráčková's return was the work of what he ambiguously termed 'communist mafias', for which Vondráčková took him to court.⁵⁷ Andrew Roberts suggests that such controversies

⁵⁷ See Renata Kalenská's interview with Rejžek: Renata Kalenská, 'Dívčí válka' [The Maidens' War], *Pátek: Magazín Lidových novin*, 16 October 2000, 11; and Jaromír Marek, 'Helena Vondráčková prohrála soudní při s hudebním kritikem Janem Rejžkem' [Helena Vondráčková loses legal battle with music critic Jan Rejžek], *Radio Praha*, 15 January 2002,

surrounding the re-emergence of socialist entertainment in the late 1990s are unique to the Czech Republic.⁵⁸ Certainly, popular culture has become a lively site for the contestation of different memories of state socialism.

To an extent it is not surprising that socialist popular culture was brought to the fore once again nearly ten years after the demise of the socialist regime. As Martin Franc notes, a nostalgic form of reception requires distance. According to him, '[Czech] society at the beginning of the 1990s was largely oversaturated with experiences connected with the type of consumer society associated with real existing socialism'.⁵⁹ The ten years of post-socialism provided a sufficient time lapse for the new system to become consolidated in the Czech Republic and a partial generational exchange to take place for the socialist period to seem sufficiently distant. However, it would be inaccurate to say that socialist popular culture had been completely absent from the Czech cultural scene throughout the 1990s. While it was certainly the case, as Roberts points out, that the commercial TV station Nova, which began broadcasting in 1994, 'became the most popular in the region by feeding its audiences a steady diet of American programming from *Matlock* and *Baywatch* to *MASH* and *ER*',⁶⁰ Czechoslovak television programmes from the socialist period continued to be shown.

Franc rightly notes that 'November 1989 represented an important break in the programming of Czechoslovak Television; however, already at the beginning of the 1990s it became clear that in the long term it is not viable for television to give up archival programming, for financial reasons among others'.⁶¹ Franc also comments on the traditionally conservative programming in the Christmas and New Year period, which privileges re-runs, and notes that 'even in the beginning of the 1990s new episodes of the flagship of Czech [sic] Normalization entertainment were filmed, the show *Televarieté*'.⁶² The evening programme during the holiday season throughout the 1990s reveals a mixture of attempts to offer both old and new foreign productions (*My Fair Lady* in 1991, a concert of Luciano Pavarotti in 1996, etc.), as well as a return to the archives for

<http://www.radio.cz/cz/rubrika/udalosti/helena-vondrackova-prohrala-soudni-pri-s-hudebnim-kritikem-janem-rejzkem> [accessed 26 April 2013].

⁵⁸ Roberts, 764.

⁵⁹ Franc, 197.

⁶⁰ Roberts, 765.

⁶¹ Franc, 195.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 196.

'classical' socialist entertainment. To give a sample: the aforementioned variety show *Televarieté* made an appearance on 25 December of both 1991 and 1992, while the year 1993 saw a re-run of popular actor Vladimír Menšík's New Year's shows and 1994 a repeat of a New Year's show from the theatre *Semafor* (Semaphore), filmed in 1967. Compiled variety programmes of socialist-era entertainment continue to be a staple feature on Czech Television, and often serve as late-night or Sunday filler programme even outside the holiday season.⁶³ Socialist popular culture thus never truly left the public sphere in the Czech Republic and at least in television programming a distinct continuity can be traced. This was however seldom remarked upon in the press.

A particular figure who comes up consistently in holiday programming throughout the 1990s is Karel Gott, Czechoslovakia's, and later the Czech Republic's, most popular singer. It is worth pausing here to analyse what Gott represents in more detail, as he embodies the ways in which the perceived continuity of socialist popular culture is fraught with controversy in the Czech Republic. As Petr Bílek notes, 'a visible feature of the end of the 1970s is the completely dominant position of Karel Gott. This period sees a purposeful production of the attributes of "divine Karel", both through discursive journalistic speech as well as the discursive practice of his own team'.⁶⁴ But Karel Gott continues to hold an absolutely central position in the field of Czech popular music even today. Since 1963, the distinct tenor, known for inoffensive pop and *schlager* music, has been steadily winning the award of Best Singer in the country's most significant popular vote music contest, the *Český slavík* (Czech Nightingale), formerly known as *Zlatý slavík* (Golden Nightingale).⁶⁵ In 1985, he was awarded the country's highest artistic state title, *národní umělec* (national artist).⁶⁶ Having started his career in the 1960s, Gott is particularly strongly associated with the period of Normalization, during which he functioned as a significant export article

⁶³ Even at the time of writing of this thesis, I was likely to turn on the television and encounter re-runs of the 1996 variety compilation show *To je šoubyznys* (That's Show Business, Czech Television, dir. J. Vašta, 1996) on ČT1, the first channel of the public broadcaster, which, significantly, edits together clips of songs and performances from the socialist period as well as the first half of the 1990s. The continuity of personnel in television entertainment is apparent.

⁶⁴ Petr A. Bílek, 'K práci i oddechu: Znakový systém normalizační pop music', in *Tesilová kavalérie: popkulturní obrazy normalizace*, eds. Petr A. Bílek and Blanka Činátlová (Příbram: Pistorius & Olšanská, 2010), 57-75 (70).

⁶⁵ Roberts, 776.

⁶⁶ See Gott's official website, <http://www.karelgott.com/cesky/main.htm> [accessed 7 July 2013].

for the regime. Gott's investment in Normalization was also explicitly political – he led the signing of the 'Anti-Charter' in 1977, a proclamation of artists and cultural workers condemning the dissident text Charter 77.⁶⁷ Gott's open support for the Normalization regime, as well as his unashamed political U-turn in the 1990s and endorsement of right-wing doctrine, has made him the object of vocal criticism – but for his fan base, he remains 'divine Karel' or 'Mistr' (The Master). Gott, as Roberts notes, 'hardly took a break after 1989',⁶⁸ and two events in the late 1990s focusing on the singer initiated vocal debates on the merits of the continuity of socialist popular culture.

The first of these was Gott's sixtieth birthday celebration in July 1999, which took the form of a three-hour televised show where virtually the whole Czech show business establishment congratulated the singer. Even President Václav Havel sent a congratulatory note, in which he, not without irony, praised Gott for being a 'model of professional continuity'.⁶⁹ While the more left-leaning daily *Právo* asserted that the celebrations demonstrated why Gott is rightly considered the apex of Czech pop music,⁷⁰ others used the opportunity to open up debates about the role of entertainers in supporting and maintaining the socialist regime. While former dissident Bohumil Doležal asked whether the role of show business personnel in supporting the regime is not exaggerated,⁷¹ columnist Adam Drda called for open discussions of the 'amoral behaviour of Czech regime entertainers in the 1970s and 1980s'.⁷² Here Gott was attacked from the typical anti-communist position pervasive in Czech public discourse at the time, which aimed to find specific culprits and perpetrators to blame for imposing the regime on the population. Ondřej Štindl, otherwise also known for his uncompromising stance towards the past regime, was more moderate in this case, condemning 'inquisition-style' practices in relation to socialist stars, noting instead that 'I am completely satisfied with the opportunity to freely express myself on this topic and with the memory of the catharsis I lived through, when after the [Velvet] Revolution I could listen to records of Normalization pop music out of my own free

⁶⁷ See Roberts, 778.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Adam Drda, 'Gott a dissent: srovnatelná selhání?' [Gott and dissent: comparable failures?], *Lidové noviny*, 30 July 1999, 11.

⁷⁰ Jiří Tluchoř, 'Karel Gott je právem králem' [Karel Gott is rightly king], *Právo*, 15 July 1999, 12.

⁷¹ Bohumil Doležal, 'Karel Gott a bída českých intelektuálů' [Karel Gott and the poverty of Czech intellectuals], *Lidové noviny*, 20 July 1999, 1.

⁷² Drda, 'Gott a dissent: srovnatelná selhání?' [Gott and dissent: comparable failures?].

will, laugh at their stupidity and know that they no longer threaten me'.⁷³ Štindl's response thus approaches a more ironic stance which will become significant in other cultural controversies as well.

Gott's birthday was closely followed by a scandal which came to be known as 'Hannovergott', based on the title of architectural historian Zdeněk Lukeš's short article, which sparked off the whole affair. Lukeš, reflecting upon Gott's planned performance at the World Fair EXPO 2000 in Hannover, wrote: 'This zombie has been pursuing me since my childhood. Since the second half of the 1960s, he has been spoiling the taste of several generations'.⁷⁴ This assertion generated an extraordinary response. The singer let it be known that he was considering withdrawing his participation at the EXPO because of the offence caused to him,⁷⁵ which produced such a stir that the minister of culture himself implored Gott to reconsider his position in an open letter printed in *Lidové noviny*, the same daily that had published Lukeš's controversial text.⁷⁶ While the Communist Party daily *Haló noviny* defended Gott's professional qualities,⁷⁷ further reactions in *Lidové noviny* also pointed to Gott's long-standing status as the Czech number one pop music performer.⁷⁸ Critics of Gott and sympathisers of Lukeš on the other hand expressed concern at the idea that Karel Gott is truly the best that the Czech Republic can offer to represent the country at an international event – the director of the National Gallery Milan Knížák called Gott a 'symbol of kitsch'⁷⁹ and Jiří Peňás asserted that 'to boast with Karel Gott at the 2000 World Fair is nothing else than a manifestation of mental laziness, senility, and sterility, regardless of whether we personally feel the singer to cause us harm or delight'.⁸⁰ After extensive discussions, Gott was eventually persuaded to perform in Hannover.

What Gott represents became a version of the familiar dispute between high and low culture and a battle over what should be included or excluded from

⁷³ Ondřej Štindl, 'Dozvuky blbých písniček z blbé doby' [Echoes of stupid songs from a stupid time], *Lidové noviny*, 6 September 1999, 11.

⁷⁴ Zdeněk Lukeš, 'Hannovergott', *Lidové noviny*, 6 January 2000, 17.

⁷⁵ Jiří Tluchoř, 'Gott odmítl vystoupit na EXPO, Dostál jej chce přemluvit zpět' [Gott refused to perform at EXPO, Dostál wants to convince him back], *Právo*, 11 January 2000, 3.

⁷⁶ Pavel Dostál, 'Nedejte se otrávit' [Do not let yourself be annoyed], *Lidové noviny*, 11 January 2000, 10.

⁷⁷ Daniel Strož, 'A budou bez Gotta' [And they'll be without Gott], *Haló noviny*, 11 January 2000, 5.

⁷⁸ Miloslav Zapletal, 'Lidovým novinám nepoděkuji' [I will not thank Lidové noviny], *Lidové noviny*, 12 January 2000, 11.

⁷⁹ Milan Knížák, 'Umělecký i morální trpaslík' [An artistic and moral dwarf], *Lidové noviny*, 15 January 2000, 11.

⁸⁰ Jiří Peňás, 'Ministr Gotta' [The minster of Gott], *Lidové noviny*, 18 January 2000, 10.

the cultural memory of socialism. In an interview, Lukeš, author of the inflammatory text that started the whole debate, cited Alfred Radok's *Laterna magika* at the 1958 EXPO as a successful example of the type of cultural endeavour that should represent the country. Doležal reacted to this with the words that even this 'surely tasteful and elegant show promoted a Russian colony ruled by a criminal and immoral regime. A dumpling variety show [*knedlíková estráda*] in honour of an after all much more democratic Czech Republic does not seem so bad to me in comparison'.⁸¹ Doležal's comment exposes the logic of the anti-communist position: if any cultural artefact, even of dubious artistic merit, that has arisen in a democratic, capitalist system is by default more valuable than anything produced under socialism, then such a position places very little demand on the role of culture in the present, apart from legitimating the present political order. At the same time, an opinion poll conducted in this period brought the results that 84% of Czechs thought that Gott should represent the country at the EXPO. The efforts of a group of commentators to frame Gott as an embodiment of the previous regime obviously did not gain much traction.

Gott's birthday and the EXPO affair illustrate the troubled relationship that the Czechs have with the cultural legacy of socialism. The core of the issue at stake here, and which will become even more apparent in the controversy around the TV series *Třicet případů majora Zemana* discussed later in this chapter, is the opposing reaction to these dismissals of socialist entertainment. The defenders of this popular culture feel that it forms a significant part of their lives, their cultural heritage, and their everyday experience, and as such continues to be part of their memory of the period.⁸² Karel Gott, as Lukeš notes, has indeed 'haunted', but also delighted, several generations since their childhood. For defenders of socialist popular culture, to deny this culture any validity is also to deny the validity of the lived experience of many. The controversy, then, has many parallels to the fundamental issue in discussions of *Ostalgie* in Germany, namely, as Paul Cooke summarizes, a 'sense of frustration prevalent amongst many Easterners that their

⁸¹ Bohumil Doležal, 'Knedlíková estráda není hlavní problém' [Dumpling variety show not the main problem], *Lidové noviny*, 19 January 2000, 11.

⁸² Columnists were mainly critical of Gott and any endorsement of the singer remained cautious, while acknowledging his immense popularity. His defenders came from the ranks of readers who expressed their opinions in letters to the editor, in the major dailies, as well as tabloid papers such as *Blesk*. See, for example, Anon., 'Na jaké místo v naší kultuře řadíte Karla Gotta?' [Where in our culture do you place Karel Gott?], *Slovo*, 13 July 1999, 7; or Vlad'ka Chourová's letter to the editor in 'Dopisy Blesku' [Letter to Blesk], *Blesk*, 22 July 1999, 10.

experience of living in the GDR is being elided from the German historical record. (...) The result of representing the GDR as being nothing but a “Stasi state” has been the growing sense of alienation many ordinary East Germans feel, due to their conception that the actual experience of everyday life in the East has been devalued and ignored’.⁸³ While in Czech discourse the focus on Czechoslovakia as a police state has not been as strong, there is also a sense of a cleavage between ‘ordinary’ lives (as expressed in letters to the editor in both the serious and tabloid press)⁸⁴ and the discourse of an intellectual elite conveyed in press commentaries and opinion pieces. However, as chapter 2 demonstrated, anti-communist discourse was propagated largely by a limited group of people who possessed the cultural and social capital to make their voice heard in the media. Commentators such as Rejžek, Štindl, or Drda, who most often criticize socialist popular culture, are no exception, belonging to a generation that was close to the dissident community, even if they were not dissidents per se. The debate thus played out mainly amongst this handful of individuals pushing the anti-communist agenda, who discursively divided the population into a stark binary of the few who had resisted the regime and the vast majority who had failed to do so.

Discussions of German *Ostalgie* have focused less on popular culture than they have on nostalgia for consumer goods, yet parallels can be drawn as both can be seen as a means of engaging with the past. Within the *Ostalgie* debates, these consumer goods have been interpreted by some as having a high bonding potential for different sections of society. For example, Silke Arnold-de Simine maintains that ‘it is no accident that former GDR consumer objects are at the center of the *Ostalgie* phenomenon. These objects denote shared experiences rather than highlighting the differences between various memory communities. Because of their longevity they bind together different generations, standing for both the private (consumption) and the public (production) and therefore – in retrospect at least – holding the utopian promise of a reconciliation between subjectivity and

⁸³ Paul Cooke, ‘Performing “Ostalgie”: Leander Haussmann’s *Sonnenallee*’, *German Life and Letters* 56, no. 2 (2003): 156–167 (160).

⁸⁴ See (tr), ‘I hudba se dnes dá ideologicky zneužít...’ [Music too can be ideologically misused nowadays...], *Haló noviny*, 2 October 1998, 4; red, ‘Dopisy nedělnímu Blesku’ [Letters to Blesk on Sunday], 23 January 2000, 20; Michal Musil and Ondřej Neuman, ‘Je nebezpečné dotýkat se hvězd’ [It is dangerous to touch the stars], *Lidové noviny*, 19 January 2000, 17.

collectivity'.⁸⁵ Yet in the Czech Republic, as the discussed controversies have shown, there is little evidence for the reconciliatory role of engaging with reminders of socialism between various memory communities. These remain firmly divided along the lines of resistance and (passive) acquiescence with the regime. This division then further fragments the possibility of seeing a clear nostalgic association in socialist popular culture. Given the divisive responses the practice of revisiting socialist popular culture has received, it would appear that reading this as part of the nostalgia phenomenon is problematic at best. However, as I will show, dismissive responses to the politics of this popular culture can coexist with, and even lie at the core of certain types of positively-valued readings.

3.3. The past revisited versus the past recreated: *Major Zeman* and *Pelíšky*

After the accumulation of events started by Michal David's performance on Old Town Square, the year 1999 became a truly 'nostalgic moment' for the Czech Republic. In April, Jan Hřebejk's popular and well-received retro comedy *Pelíšky* was released. Then in September, after months of intense discussion, the 1970s television series *Třicet případů majora Zemana* was rescreened on Czech Television for the first time since the fall of the communist regime. Contemporary media did not comment on the conjunction of these events at all; yet it seems significant that while the media raged in a vociferous debate largely condemning *Major Zeman*, Jan Hřebejk's nostalgic comedy was greeted with critical acclaim.

Why was *Major Zeman* so controversial, when other staples of socialist television entertainment, such as the series *Inženýrská odysea* (The Engineer's Odyssey, dir. Evžen Sokolovský, 1979) or *Rozpaky kuchaře Svatopluka* (The Hesitations of Chef Svatopluk, dir. František Filip, 1984) had been rescreened without comment earlier in the 1990s?⁸⁶ Made explicitly to showcase the good work of the communist police – allegedly with direct guidance from the Ministry of

⁸⁵ Silke Arnold-de Simone, "'The Spirit of an Epoch Is Not Just Reflected in Pictures and Books, but Also in Pots and Frying Pans": GDR Museums and Memories of Everyday Life', in *The GDR Remembered: Representations of the East German State since 1989*, eds. Nick Hodgkin and Caroline Pearce (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), 95-111 (108).

⁸⁶ See Jiří Peňáš, 'Nesmrtelní hurvínci' [Immortal hurvíneks (children's cartoon character – my note)], *Respekt*, 6 May 1996, 3; Bren, 237; Roberts, 771.

the Interior⁸⁷ – *Major Zeman* was perceived as the most heavily ideologized product of socialist television, mapping the years 1945-1975 through the story of the policeman Major Jan Zeman and the cases he solves. The proposal of Czech Television to rescreen the series in the 1990s garnered extraordinary attention from the time it was first publically mentioned. Already in 1996, the director of the commercial TV station *Nova*, Vladimír Železný, condemned Czech Television's intention, stating that 'it is an opening of graves'.⁸⁸ Some warned of the morally corrupting potential of the series⁸⁹ and the KPV protested loudly against the allegedly insulting nature of the series towards victims of communist oppression.⁹⁰

Claiming that it wished to stimulate a public debate, and perhaps inspired by Slovak commercial channel Markíza's successful rerun of the series in 1998,⁹¹ Czech Television did eventually begin rescreening the series in September 1999, accompanying each episode with a thirty-minute documentary, which aimed to reconstruct how historical events, distorted in the series, had really unfolded. In addition, after the documentaries, Czech Television also irregularly broadcast a series of studio debates with historians and other relevant 'experts', who discussed key aspects of the socialist past. By claiming that it wanted to 'set things right' [*uvést na pravou míru*] through the documentaries, Czech Television however ended up in the precarious position of 'normalizing' history by offering a corrective interpretation of the past.⁹²

⁸⁷ Bren, 81.

⁸⁸ Anon., 'Železný váhá směnit kanál s Premiérou kvůli mjr. Zemanovi' [Železný unsure whether to exchange channel with Premiéra because of Major Zeman], *Právo*, 27 May 1996, 2.

⁸⁹ See, for example, Pavel Šafr, 'Do našich domovů se vrací Rudý Honza' [Red Honza is returning to our homes], *Lidové noviny*, 16 September 1999, 1; Tomáš Vystrčil, 'V debatě o Zemanovi nikdo vážně diskutovat nechce' [Nobody wants to talk seriously in Zeman debate], *Lidové noviny*, 29 September 1999, 9; Michal Pavlata, 'Vysílání majora Zemana není ve veřejném zájmu' [Broadcast of Major Zeman not in public interest], *Lidové noviny*, 15 October 1999, 1.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Anon., 'Major Zeman se vrací na obrazovky' [Major Zeman returns to the screens], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 1 October 1998, 6; Mirka Spáčilová, 'Česká televize hledá argumenty pro uvedení Majora Zemana' [Czech Television searching for arguments for showing Major Zeman], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 16 September 1999, 6; Jaromír Chochola, 'Protestují vězni, poslanci i odboráři' [Prisoners, MPs and trade unionists all protest], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 16 September 1999, 6.

⁹¹ Jindřich Šídlo, 'Třicet případů majora Puchalského' [The thirty cases of Major Puchalský], *Respekt*, 30 November 1998, 5.

⁹² The formulation that the documentaries would 'set things right' [*uvést na pravou míru*], appeared repeatedly in the press, see e.g., Mirka Spáčilová, 'Česká televize hledá argumenty pro uvedení Majora Zemana' [Czech Television searching for arguments for showing Major Zeman], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 16 September 1999, 6; fik, ces, 'Představiteli majora Zemana se uvedení seriálu s komentářem nelíbí' [Major Zeman actor not happy with broadcast of series with commentary], *Lidové noviny*, 2 October 1998, 4; Emíle Harantová, 'Je návrat Zemana na obrazovky chybou, nebo záslužným počinem?' [Is the return of Zeman to the screen a mistake or a commendable act?], *Lidové noviny*, 10 September 1999, 23.

Pelíšky, on the other hand, received largely positive reviews and soon became a cult film of the period.⁹³ The comedy was praised for its accurate recreation of the 1960s setting in terms of props, set design and costumes, its acting, and for the period music on its soundtrack.⁹⁴ A term which often recurs in contemporary reviews is 'quality', be it of the acting, the screenplay, and in particular the period music used, putting forward the idea that socialist pop culture was in many ways of a higher standard than the Westernized, imported culture which became prevalent after 1989.⁹⁵ The film, created by the same team as *Šakalí léta* of director Hřebejk and screenwriter Jarchovský, once again making use of a text by Petr Šabach, is set in the months directly preceding the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia and details the cohabitation of two neighbouring families with widely differing political opinions in one Prague house. *Pelíšky* operates with well-established tropes familiar already from earlier representations from the 1990s: it is a family picture, reconstructing the private spaces of life, the 'cosy dens' of the title, where the characters are safe from outside pressures. The narrative is once again structured by the view of a teenage protagonist, the fifteen-year-old Michal, who observes the personal and political bickering of his father with his neighbour, Kraus, with a sense of bemused disgust.

What then do *Pelíšky* and the rescreening of *Major Zeman* have in common? These two events represent two very different types of text and practice: the past revisited (in the case of the television series from the 1970s) and the past re-created in representation (the film). Engaging directly with material reminders of socialism directly appeals to experience; the recreation of the past in retrospective representation creates ground for comparison with lived experience and thus gives rise to new imaginings in the space between the creators' and viewers' conceptions of the past. The mediation of the past through this imaginative space may account for the widely differing reception that the series and the film

⁹³ The film was seen in cinemas by an audience of over 1 million, a staggering number in a country of 10 million inhabitants. <http://lumiere.obs.coe.int/web/search/> [accessed 15 November 2015]. Taking into account its wide availability on DVD and frequent repeats on television, its impact is truly remarkable.

⁹⁴ See, for example, Anon., 'Hřebejkův nový film Pelíšky se vydává do českých kin' [Hřebejk's new film Pelíšky hits cinemas], *Hradecké noviny*, 6 April 1999, 8; Anna Matušková, 'Pelíšky mi umožňují cestovat volně v čase' [Pelíšky enable me to travel in time – interview with Petr Jarchovský], *Lidové noviny*, 10 April 1999, 13.

⁹⁵ See, for example, Věra Míšková, 'Humor filmových Pelíšků zalézá až pod kůži' [The humour of Pelíšky goes under the skin], *Právo*, 9 April 1999, 12.

received. For critics of the past regime, engaging with an image *of* the past is seen as much less threatening than engaging with an image *from* the past. Yet at the same time, there are a number of common mechanisms at play that connect *Pelíšky* and *Major Zeman*. Although both texts, and *Major Zeman* in particular, also invited a number of other responses, the link between these two events can be traced in a specific mode of reception which situates both the series and the film within the retro phenomenon.

The debates surrounding *Třicet případů majora Zemana* can be divided into several camps.⁹⁶ I have already partially outlined what I call the ‘repressive approach’. This response was propagated by the anti-communist section of the press and public, led by the KPV, and included many of the same commentators who simultaneously voiced their concerns over Karel Gott. Generally, adherents of this view felt that it was wrong for a public broadcaster to show a programme so blatantly defending an ideology they considered criminal. Like in the Karel Gott debates, the issue of the perceived immorality of socialist entertainment came to the fore. Concern was expressed about the effect the rescreening might have on young viewers;⁹⁷ others, including Jan Rejžek, compared the obvious propagandistic intentions of *Major Zeman* to the films of Leni Riefenstahl.⁹⁸ Adam Drda once again questioned the moral ‘cadre profile’ of socialist-era entertainers. Commenting on the second accompanying studio debate broadcast on 23 September 1999, in an article tellingly entitled ‘Intelektuální katastrofa na ČT 1’ (‘An intellectual catastrophe on the First Channel’), Drda was disgusted by what he saw as *Major Zeman* actor Radoslav Brzobohatý’s attempt to jovially ingratiate himself with former political prisoner Jiří Stránský, thus morally acquitting his role in the series.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ I am indebted to Jan Kohoutek’s categorization of responses to *Major Zeman*, as detailed in his dissertation, ‘Veřejná polemika o uvedení seriálu Třicet případů majora Zemana v České televizi po roce 1989 (diskurzivní analýza českého celostátního tisku)’, MA diss., Masaryk University Brno, 2011.

⁹⁷ Many press articles make reference to the ‘morally corrupting’ potential of the series for young viewers, but then go on to refute it. *Lidové noviny*, for example, published an article entitled ‘Young people are not interested in Zeman at all’ (Marek Keries, ‘Mládež se o Zemana vůbec nezajímá’, *Lidové noviny*, 17 September 1999, 4).

⁹⁸ Jan Rejžek, ‘Major Zeman na hrad?’ [Major Zeman to the Castle?], *Literární noviny* 10, no. 39 (1999), 4.

⁹⁹ Adam Drda, ‘Intelektuální katastrofa na ČT 1’ [An intellectual catastrophe on the First Channel], *Lidové noviny*, 25 September 1999, 10.

While columnists like Drda called for an active coming to terms with the past, the television debate itself demonstrated very clearly the unwillingness of representatives of various strands within society to broach this topic. Stránský's evasive comments that 'the table needs to be cleared' did not offer any constructive steps; columnist Tomáš Vystrčil was equally vague in stating that things should have been named clearly long ago. The other participants also failed to articulate what exactly would constitute such a coming to terms with the past, apart from optimistic historian Vilém Prečan, who believed they were already setting the process in motion by simply attending the debate.¹⁰⁰ The discourse of the KPV was the clearest in offering concrete solutions: in the first television debate, KPV chairman Stanislav Drobný suggested 'dealing with the past' should consist of 'punishing communist criminals'.¹⁰¹ The KPV's stance towards the series thus used the rhetoric of the 'ethical opposition' between the past as evil and the present as good, discussed in the previous chapter, to cast the communist regime as a period of trauma. Although, as Kamil Činátl points out, the attitude of the KPV received considerable traction in the media, they failed to turn this rhetoric into specific gains – the broadcast of the series did go ahead and the lawsuit the organization filed against Czech Television was unsuccessful.¹⁰²

Czech Television's promise to deliver a nationwide discussion of the past through *Major Zeman* thus had mixed results. Jiří Peňás's call for *Major Zeman* to become the equivalent of the German *Historikerstreit* did not materialize.¹⁰³ Instead, the competing 'quality narrative' pointed to the perceived continuity of socialist popular culture in certain sections of society. The 'quality' approach is perhaps nearest in character to Svetlana Boym's restorative nostalgia, which, she argues, significantly for the context of *Major Zeman*, turns to notions of tradition. The adherents of this view wish to reclaim this site of socialist popular culture, which they see as traditional and good quality entertainment. This particular narrative, then, is interested in the continuity of popular culture and of the original viewing experience, sharing the initial impulse of validating socialist culture with

¹⁰⁰ Debate accompanying the series *The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman* entitled "Tlustá čára za minulostí?" ('A thick line behind the past?'), Czech Television, broadcast on 23 September 1999, dir. Marek Straka, Czech Television Archive, IDEC: 299 322 22469/0002.

¹⁰¹ Untitled debate accompanying the series *The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman* [Beseda k seriálu Třicet případů Majora Zemana], Czech Television, broadcast on 16 September 1999, dir. Marek Straka, Czech Television Archive, IDEC: 299 322 22469/0001.

¹⁰² Kamil Činátl, *Naše české minulosti* (Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2014), 187.

¹⁰³ Jiří Peňás, 'Asimilovaná lež' [Assimilated lie], *Respekt*, 12 October 1998, 19.

the defenders of Karel Gott. The argument made is that *Major Zeman*, in spite of its ideological content, is in fact a solid piece of filmmaking and an entertaining detective series, superior to excessively violent and sexualized Western productions.¹⁰⁴ A similar dynamic can be seen in other post-socialist countries as well. Boym argues that '1990s nostalgia for the Brezhnev era was partially based on the old Soviet movies that reappeared on Russian TV at the time. Many Russian viewers, tired of upheavals and lost illusions of the post-Soviet decade, tuned in and suddenly began to believe that Soviet life resembled those movies, forgetting their own experiences as well as their ways of watching those films twenty years earlier – with much more scepticism and double entendre'.¹⁰⁵ She thus points to the significant fact that a changing reception context can lead to new interpretations; despite an ostensible investment in recuperating the original viewing experience, retrospective reviewing necessarily generates new ways of reading.

A complex reading landscape thus begins to emerge, where a number of strategies compete with one another. It is a well-documented phenomenon within literary studies that readers searched for signs of 'Aesopian language' in socialist literature – the kind of 'double entendre' Boym mentions – or a code of political metaphors and allegories, which could be interpreted as being critical of the regime or somehow subversive.¹⁰⁶ The same mode of reading can be applied to television as well. While a rejection of Aesopian reading strategies leads to simply attending to the genre of the series and producing the 'quality' narrative, in other readings, attempts at decoding persist. 'Seeing through' the obvious ideological content of *Major Zeman* thus becomes a significant part of its viewing pleasure for certain sections of the audience. This could perhaps be best termed the 'educational approach' – a number of contributors to the debate argued that the obvious ideological intentions of the series made it an excellent didactic tool for

¹⁰⁴ See Martin Komárek, 'Jedni tajtrlíci se vracejí, druzí už tu jsou' [Some clowns return, others are already here], *Mladá Fronta Dnes*, 13 November 1998, 15. This attitude was also particularly marked in responses from newspaper readers, for example, 'Hlasy čtenářů: Návrat majora Zemana - je to vtip, či nebezpečí?' [Readers' voices: Return of Major Zeman – is it a joke or a danger?], *Mladá Fronta Dnes*, 7 August 1998, 11.

¹⁰⁵ Boym, 61.

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, Lev Losev, *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature*, trans. Jane Bobko (Munich: Otto Sagner in Kommission, 1984); or, Andrei Terian, 'The Rhetoric of Subversion: Strategies of "Aesopian Language" in Romanian Literary Criticism Under Late Communism', *Slovo* 24, no. 2 (2012):75-95.

learning about the functioning of communist propaganda.¹⁰⁷ This was also the view propagated by academic writing on the subject. In an edited collection devoted to *Major Zeman* and James Bond, Petr Bílek summarizes this position effectively: 'In the stories about Major Zeman, all ideological propaganda is so transparently obvious that the fear that, through watching the series, the viewer would believe in the positives of a satisfied life under communism is somewhat paranoid'.¹⁰⁸

The decoding of Aesopian features however generated another kind of response. This could best be described as 'ironic', though the word that appeared in the Czech media more frequently was *recese*. This term without a direct English equivalent denotes a certain type of practical humour, which has a long tradition in Czech culture, from the work of Jaroslav Hašek, author of the archetypal character Švejk, to the theatre of Jára Cimrman, which stages only the plays attributed to an entirely fictional genius and jack-of-all-trades. An ironic reading does very little to reflect on politics. It is interested in the aesthetic level of practices and representations and thus takes a kind of ironic, postmodern view – it uses socialist aesthetics for the purposes of its own playful pastiche of the past. This reading mainly arose at a point when a certain generational exchange had taken place: ironic approaches to the series largely occurred when the viewer did not have a strong experiential investment in the period in which the series was made and was thus able to approach it with the kind of detachment that facilitates irony.¹⁰⁹

The ironic approach turns *Major Zeman* into a retro artefact, where similar features to those already determined in some of the representations from the early 1990s can be discerned. The shift that has taken place here is that while retro mechanisms are inscribed in texts like *Báječná léta pod psa* or *Šakalí léta*, in the

¹⁰⁷ (spa), 'Je to skvělá studijní látka...' [It's great study material...], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 16 September 1999, 6. The educational value of the series was also one of Czech Television's official arguments for rescreening *Major Zeman*. See, e.g., Anon., 'Major Zeman bude od září na obrazovkách ČT' [Major Zeman will return to the screens from September], *Právo*, 26 August 1999, 1; or, Jindřich Šídlo, 'Třicet případů majora Puchalského' [The thirty cases of Major Puchalský], *Respekt*, 30 November 1998, 5.

¹⁰⁸ Petr A. Bílek, 'Předmluva', in Petr A. Bílek, ed., *James Bond a major Zeman: Ideologizující vzorce vyprávění* (Příbram: Pistorius & Olšanská, 2007), 7-9 (9).

¹⁰⁹ This attitude was exemplified by Michal Zavadil, who belongs to the generation of viewers who initially saw *Major Zeman* as young children, and was the chairman of the *Společnost přátel Majora Zemana* (Society of Friends of Major Zeman), an unofficial *Major Zeman* fanclub. In the first TV debate accompanying the series, he called *Major Zeman* 'wonderful postmodern entertainment'. *Beseda k seriálu Třicet případů Majora Zemana*, Czech Television, 16 September 1999. Kamil Činátl also corroborates the 'generational' perception of this attitude in the media. See Činátl, *Naše české minulosti*, 194.

case of *Major Zeman* a particular type of response attributes retro characteristics to an artefact which was not made with any such discernible strategy. This retro reading arises from viewing the series with a certain camp sensibility that could be summarized with the slogan 'it's so bad that it's good'. Over-the-top performances and over-coding of certain phenomena, such as the exaggerated portrayal of drug use in the episode 'Mimikry' create a kind of hyperbolic mode, which invites ironic readings. This episode allows the viewer to engage in several levels of decoding and to thus partake of an 'in-joke' situation – the pleasure is derived from a kind of intellectual flattery of the viewer who can congratulate him or herself on recognizing the reference. Watching the series thus becomes a game of spotting ideological fabrications. The overt purpose of this episode is to suggest to the viewer that a real-life hijacking of an airplane in 1972 was carried out by a group of underground rock musicians. Furthermore, the series would have us believe that the hijackers were drug users. However, viewers even rudimentarily familiar with the historical context will know that the hijacking had nothing to do with the underground rock scene and that the suggestion that the hijackers and members of the band The Plastic People of the Universe, whom the episode is attempting to parody, were heroin addicts, is far-fetched to say the least. Such a seeing through then allows viewers to enjoy the humorous irony of the highly unrealistic portrayal of heroin use in the episode.



Figure 6. *Pelíšky* (Cosy Dens). Jan Hřebejk (director) and Petr Jarchovský (screenwriter), 1999.

This kind of ironic reading deliberately elides political questions and is concerned with the aesthetic surface of the series. The aesthetic surface of the

period becomes a key category in *Pelíšky* as well, which is stylistically and narratively structured around a number of objects from the 1960s. The private setting of the film, with interiors dominating over exteriors, allows it to become a showcase for a number of retro markers, such as interior decorations, fabrics, hairstyles, fashions, and not least artefacts, both in the film's mise-en-scène and its narrative structure. A number of key scenes revolve around such endearingly deficient socialist products as plastic spoons from the GDR that dissolve in hot coffee, or 'unbreakable' glasses from Poland (Fig. 6). The aesthetics of nostalgia revels in the deficiency of these objects, laughing at the inadequacy of the products portrayed, and elevates these defects to a retrospectively 'hip' status. This, I propose, is a viewing strategy akin to the joking or ironic approach to *Major Zeman*. In the series, it is precisely those aspects that appear substandard, such as the stilted dialogues, the lack of action, or long scenes of narratively redundant political meetings, which are highlighted as that which becomes retrospectively amusing. In a similar way, deficient fashions and objects of the sixties, seventies, or eighties in retrospective representations possess a certain retro-attractiveness precisely because of their perceived unsightliness.

Like in *Šakalí léta*, the recreation of the period in *Pelíšky* is not concerned with accuracy, but with retro looks – the design of the film creates an ahistorical pastiche of nostalgic markers, generating a recognizable semblance of pastness for the viewer, while retaining a contemporary aesthetic appeal. The retrospective narrative strategy allows for a creative use of the rift between memory and fact – hence, as Alena Prokopová observes, it is immaterial whether the 'unbreakable' glasses and plastic spoons which play such a seminal role in the film historically came onto the market in 1967/68, as the film suggests.¹¹⁰ In a similar way, the film's soundtrack recreates the period with songs that were only recorded after the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, and hence after the film's narrative presence.¹¹¹ Though displaying a less over-the-top visual aesthetic, like *Šakalí léta*, the design of *Pelíšky* participates in a retro mode.

At the same time however, *Pelíšky* is not only concerned with style, but generates nostalgic affect to a greater extent than *Šakalí léta*. The film, in its

¹¹⁰ See Alena Prokopová, 'Rodinné pelíšky' [Family dens], *Film a doba* 45, no. 2 (1999): 94-96.

¹¹¹ An example is the film's central song, 'Sluneční hrob' (Sun Grave) by the band Blue Effect, which was only formed in the autumn of 1968.

evocation of cosy and comfortable family spaces, very much plays on the concept of the everyday. Like *Kolja*, which employed glowing golden visuals to create an inviting, sentimentalized gaze, *Pelíšky* uses a yellowish camera filter to endow all interior shots with a radiant warmth. Socialism is depicted in warm shades of brown (Fig. 7). Like the representations of the early 1990s, *Pelíšky* relies on a retrospective narrative strategy to generate a sense of nostalgic longing for youth gone by. Events are recounted through voiceover by an older version of teenager Michal, who, despite living through formative moments of his life at the time of the political upheaval of the Prague Spring, is solely concerned with his own private problems, in particular his unrequited love for his neighbour, Jindřiška. The narrative, revolving around family events and rituals, remains in the personal realm, focusing on a limited group of characters and their relationships with one another. *Pelíšky* thus makes use of the same structure as Viewegh's and Šabach's texts or *Šakalí léta*, setting aside an explicit thematization of the politics of the past and, like in *Kolja*, adopting a sheltered, forgiving view of the period. The film thus mines sentiment through a two-fold investment: the nostalgic mood by definition turns to a lost time, and *Pelíšky* strengthens this through focusing narratively on unfulfilled moments or moments of loss. This is the case with Michal's unsuccessful attempts to woo Jindřiška, and on a larger level, the Warsaw Pact invasion, marking the end of an era and lamented in the film by Kraus's plaintive rendition of the national anthem on the piano. To use Grainge's typology, mood and mode coexist in the film: the comic mode of portraying the everyday shifts to the sentimental mood of the exceptional, a technique that grants the scene of the invasion all the more potency by disrupting the cosy domesticity that preceded it.



Figure 7. *Pelíšky* (Cosy Dens). Jan Hřebejk (director) and Petr Jarchovský (screenwriter), 1999.

The film's investment in apolitical domesticity, together with its retro mode, would seem to make it a prime example of what Jameson perceives as a lack of historicity in postmodern culture. Certainly, *Pelíšky* has been read as ahistorical. Jan Čulík, for example, argues that the focus on the family and domesticity is historically inaccurate in the film, prefiguring the period of Normalization and its ethos of the separation of the public and the private, which he summarizes as follows: "The Normalization message is clear: don't bother us with politics. We want to live a calm enclosed family life, focusing on interpersonal relationships."¹¹² Françoise Mayer believes that this accounted for the success of *Pelíšky*, *Kolja*, and similar films,¹¹³ suggesting that the film's ostensible investment in the non-political had a wide popular appeal. However, while it attempts to create an apolitical space, the film itself, as well as responses to it, cannot avoid carrying certain historical and political assumptions.

The fiction of *Pelíšky* operates on an implicit political contract between the filmmakers and the viewer: the politics of the period does not need to be explicitly addressed, because it is understood that the audience does not sympathize with the socialist system. The structure of the narrative itself prevents viewers from doing so – the narrative arc is carried by teenage protagonists who set themselves

¹¹² Jan Čulík, *Jací jsme*, 196.

¹¹³ Mayer, 259.

up against the system, while characters who make use of the system to further their own goals are portrayed in a negative light (such as the careerist teacher and later headmaster Saša Mašlaň). Like *Kolja*, Hřebejk's film allows the viewer to engage in a kind of nostalgia for resistance. Films such as *Pelíšky* ask us to identify with characters who resist communist authority; the viewer sympathizes with their acts of petty heroism. For example, in an iconic scene, the otherwise despotic head of family, Kraus, steps out onto his balcony and with boyish relish shouts a rather innocent anti-regime obscenity – 'Proletarians of the world, go fuck yourselves' [*Proletáři všech zemí, vyližte si prdel!*] – and then gleefully returns inside to his wife with the words 'What a relief' [*To se mi ulevilo*].

Such moments of petty heroism generate humour in the film, allowing the viewer to indulge in the kind of 'liberating laughter' that critics praised Viewegh for. But while the film would appear to offer the possibility to laugh away the repressive aspects of the period, like in *Kolja* this leads to a rather facile apologetics. As Kamil Fila has observed, the narrative structure of the film guides the viewer towards an anti-communist stance, which allows the audience to dismiss all communists as the caricatured 'Other'.¹¹⁴ Nostalgic and anti-communist feelings are thus easily reconciled. Representations that make use of nostalgic tropes turn to a morally more clear-cut time: a black and white portrayal of 'us' and 'them', good and evil, where the viewer is always by default positioned in the camp of those who at least in small, petty ways disagreed with the regime. Nostalgia for resistance thus allows the viewer, together with the characters who drive the narrative, to revel in how well they managed to set themselves up against the 'Other' communists. The genre of retro-comedy further adds to this contract established through the narrative structure: by assuming viewers share a condemnation of the past regime, which becomes a given, the film can set an explicit depiction of politics aside and indulge instead in the pleasing and amusing retro aesthetics of the past, which can thus no longer be seen as in any way threatening. This kind of aesthetic veil results in a less overt handling of politics compared to its heavy-handed treatment in *Major Zeman*. But at the same time, it is precisely this heavy-handedness of politics in the television series, which allows

¹¹⁴ Kamil Fila, 'Muž na rozcestí' [A man at the crossroads], *Respekt*, 26 November 2012, 52-58 (58).

for a similar kind of resistant response that sees through and rejects the ideology of the series.

Andrew Roberts interpreted the revival of Czech socialist television series as apolitical, comparing it to American pop culture nostalgia, to which whole television channels are dedicated: 'Usually such nostalgia is either a mindless surrender to the atmosphere of one's youth or a knowing wink at the campiness of the past. In neither case is politics much in evidence.'¹¹⁵ However, while many readings of *Major Zeman* may not be explicitly political, they once again operate with certain assumptions. The aforementioned practice of 'seeing through' and laughing at the overly ideologized elements of a series like *Major Zeman* enables the viewer to also engage in a kind of retrospective heroism. Thus both representations and re-visiting of the past afford the viewer the possibility of setting him or herself 'above' the period ideology and reaffirming the ideology of the present. In the case of retrospective representations, this is achieved through a narrative strategy in which the viewer is asked to identify with anti-regime characters. In period representations, the narrative is driven by characters that support the regime – thus the 'petty heroism' is transferred to the viewer who, with retrospective knowledge, creates a resistant reading of the ideology displayed in the television piece or film in question.

Significantly, the different reading strategies outlined are not mutually exclusive and can coexist. A resistant reading of *Major Zeman* can complement aesthetic surface readings: because *Major Zeman* is so heavily ideologized, attending only to the aesthetic level is already a form of setting oneself 'above' the ideology. There is, as Martin Franc points out, an element of vicarious enjoyment at play here: 'Though the popularity of television series of the 1970s and 1980s is, for a certain section of the audience, truly influenced by their at least partial agreement with the thoughts and visions that these series overtly or covertly present, a significant part of their popularity lies in an element of provocation or pleasure from a fruit that at least some wish to forbid'.¹¹⁶ In such a reading, viewers, on the one hand, return to a site of their everyday life during socialism, but at the same time the re-viewing experience, with its inherent retrospective knowledge, affords a sense of ironic detachment and moral superiority to the

¹¹⁵ Roberts, 773.

¹¹⁶ Franc, 201.

ideology displayed. As Kevin Platt has discussed in the post-Soviet context, ‘a stance of ironic distance makes it possible to take pleasure in the entertainment traditions of “the good old days” without necessarily entertaining the idea that there was anything particularly good about the Soviet era as a whole’.¹¹⁷ Platt’s argument can equally well be applied to the Czech context. Furthermore, his analysis points to the fact that the practice of retrospective reviewing necessarily produces a sense of distance; the original viewing experience can never be reproduced. A sense of historical awareness is thus embedded in the reviewing of the series, even if this reviewing strives for a restorative or quality narrative.

Lynn Spigel effectively summarizes how such an effect is intrinsic to the practice of watching reruns. Writing about the American television network Nickelodeon, which reprises 1950s sitcoms under a nostalgia label, Spigel argues that ‘despite this nostalgia, the idea that the viewer is somehow more enlightened than the characters (and audiences) of the past is absolutely central to the interpretation the network solicits. Thus, both in its individual texts and in its institutional strategies of syndication, television recontextualizes the past in terms of contemporary uses and perspectives. (...) Television engages in a kind of historical consciousness that remembers the past in order to believe in the progress of the present.’¹¹⁸ Like *Pelíšky*, which guides the viewer towards a stance reaffirming the status quo, the ironic distance in rewatchings of *Major Zeman* also implicitly endorses the present and its progress over the socialist period. This view was at times corroborated by the ‘quality narrative’, where the discussion of quality focused on the allegedly superior craft of the series, while assuming that the politics of the series had been overcome, or was not relevant to the viewing experience.¹¹⁹

The case of *Major Zeman* thus frustrates attempts to divide practices of consuming the past into neat categories and shows how feelings of nostalgia can be invested only in very specific aspects of an artefact or practice that arises in certain reading contexts, rather than in the period as a whole. Furthermore it

¹¹⁷ Kevin M. F. Platt, ‘Russian Empire of Pop: Post-Socialist Nostalgia and Soviet Retro at the “New Wave” Competition’, *The Russian Review* 72, no. 3 (2013): 447–69 (449).

¹¹⁸ Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 361–362.

¹¹⁹ See the responses of Pavel Dvořák and Marcel Novotný in ‘Hlasy čtenářů: Návrat majora Zemana - je to vtip, či nebezpečí?’ [Readers’ Voices: The return of Major Zeman – is it a joke or a danger?], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 7 August 1998, 11.

demonstrates that restorative and reflective nostalgia need not be as mutually exclusive as Svetlana Boym suggests – both types amalgamate in situations like the rewatching of *Major Zeman*, where wistful nostalgic responses can mingle with more ironic enjoyments. A single artefact can carry divergent nostalgic meanings: Major Zeman’s glasses can serve as both a memory trigger, inviting personalized affective responses (‘These were the glasses my father wore’), while the viewer can equally well be aware that such glasses have nowadays been re-appropriated as trendy hipster chic (Fig. 8). A similar dynamic can be observed in *Pelíšky*, where nostalgic mood and mode coexist and a sentimental investment in the period coincides with a detached appreciation of retro aesthetics. The commonalities of *Major Zeman* and *Pelíšky* thus lie in a particular type of response, which produces ironic readings, but can at the same time coalesce with different reading strategies. This case study further demonstrates that while retro can be viewed as a set of postmodern textual strategies, it is also a particular way of reading, which through an ironic gaze attributes postmodern characteristics to period texts.



Figure 8. *Třicet případů majora Zemana* (The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman). Jiří Sequens (director, screenwriter), Czechoslovak Television, 1974-1979.

Nostalgia in the Czech context can thus be witnessed as a sentiment evoked in relation to specific aspects of the past, such as youthful reminiscence or everyday resistance. The multiple reading strategies which emerge from the case

studies in this chapter however point to a more multi-layered cultural dynamic that cannot be subsumed under a local version of the *Ostalgie* framework. As I have argued, the Czech cultural context operates with a number of oppositions, which, however, are not mutually exclusive. Their blurry boundaries and complex interactions within a single text and its reception complicate Boym's division of nostalgia into just two main narrative categories. The examples in this chapter illustrate that when discussing post-socialist nostalgia, it is less useful to speak of categories into which representations and practices can be grouped, rather than a set of particular mechanisms that representations and practices utilize. Nostalgia thus occurs as a response in specific reception situations; it is thus possible to speak of retro or kitsch – and, by extension, nostalgic – readings, rather than retro or kitsch or nostalgic texts as such.

Czech cultural reflections of socialism in the 1990s thus displayed a two-fold drive: on the one hand, they turned, necessarily, to a sense of break with the socialist period; at the same time, they spoke of a particular politics of the present. The fact that David's re-emergence came hand-in-hand with capitalist marketing strategies is emblematic of the way the past has been appropriated in this period. Nadkarni and Shevchenko have detected a similar dynamic in the post-Soviet context, arguing that 'mocking and ridiculing the ideological symbols associated with the socialist past, these [nostalgic] practices self-consciously deprived previously potent images of their prior meaning'.¹²⁰ They further suggest that turning politically meaningful symbols of the past into kitsch was a way 'to enable post-socialist subjects to look back at the past with no fear of its return'.¹²¹ Hence, 'Soviet-themed kitsch is fuelled by market logic and is targeted primarily at the outsiders to whom it provides reassuring evidence that socialism is comfortably (and profitably) dead and that capitalist logic reigns supreme'.¹²² This argument can be applied not just to kitsch interpretations of socialist culture, but also to other ways of creating a sense of distancing between the present and the past. Through a coding of the period as over and done, the aesthetics and politics of the past are used to establish a narrative of linear development from socialism into market capitalism. Thus, a variety of continuity is indeed a key category in the

¹²⁰ Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko, 'The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Practices', *Ab Imperio* 4, no. 2 (2004): 487-519 (499).

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 500.

¹²² *Ibid.*

Czech cultural landscape of the 1990s: representations and practise create a narrative of bridging the historical break of the transition to capitalism and producing a sense of progress. This differs from the elegiac tone of German *Ostalgie*, as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, which laments the loss of the East German state; Czech culture, by contrast, ostensibly turns to the past to create a future-oriented narrative. The pleasure granted by nostalgic aspects of these representations and practices in engaging with socialist aesthetics serves to ultimately reaffirm satisfaction with the present political order: the retro gaze with which objects and fashions of the period are appreciated exposes the deficiency of this aesthetic – endearing, but ultimately inferior. On a political level, petty heroism and resistant readings of socialist popular culture also serve to establish a sense of superiority of the present, affording readers and viewers with anti-communist credentials.

Chapter 4. Colourful times of small-scale resistance: representing socialism as comedy in the 2000s and 2010s

The previous chapter detailed the development and consolidation of several different modes of representation of the socialist past in the 1990s and the controversies sparked by the re-emergence of socialist popular culture. This chapter moves on into the 2000s, a time when television entertainment and music of the socialist era no longer aroused the same passions in the media, but had rather become an accepted part of the Czech cultural landscape. It is with this setting in mind that I return to two features of representing the past identified in chapter 3 that become particularly salient in this period, namely the trope of nostalgia for resistance against the previous regime and the retro mode. Through a close reading of several popular representations, this chapter argues that uses of genre and conceptions of heroism play into the political interpretation of the socialist period as a time that was collectively rejected and resisted – while also providing aesthetic pleasure in the present.

During the course of the 2000s, comedy continued to dominate retrospective re-imaginings of the state socialist past. Within this generic setting, nostalgia, in a somewhat counter-intuitive turn, looks back upon the oppressive aspects of the regime. What practically all Czech comedic representations of socialism share is a nostalgia for resistance against authority, for bringing it down with small, private gestures. By assuming that readers and viewers share a condemnation of the past regime with the protagonists of these narratives, representations can set politics aside and indulge in the aesthetics of the past.

It is precisely this move that gives rise to the second feature that this chapter focuses on: a retro mode of representation. Ostensibly concerned with surface and style, retro's implicit political meaning rests on the position of safety from which it narrates the past, i.e. the firm knowledge that the politics of the socialist experiment can be dismissed. This constitutes a significant difference to the German version of post-socialist nostalgia, where a nostalgic longing for the utopian promise of socialism is in evidence. In *Good Bye, Lenin!* (dir. Wolfgang Becker, 2003), the main character Alex re-builds a socialist universe inside his flat after the fall of the wall as a charade for his ill mother, only to realize that he has constructed the land he would have wished for. The changes of 1989 are a

confusing event which set off a chain of action in the film that leads to a reckoning with the socialist past, and a slow and tortured letting go. In Czech representations of socialism, on the other hand, the Velvet Revolution is the implicit *telos* towards which the narrativization of the period strives. I have argued that retro casts a linear narrative of progress from socialism into post-socialism and thus projects a sense of continuity. In this sense, retro's temporal dynamics differ from nostalgia: as Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko note, 'a sense of break from the past is necessary for nostalgia to exist in the first place; the perception of loss is the precondition for discourses of return and recovery'.¹ A less pronounced temporal rupture features in Svetlana Boym's interpretation of restorative nostalgia. 'What drives restorative nostalgia', Boym writes, 'is not the sentiment of distance and longing but rather the anxiety about those who draw attention to historical incongruities between past and present and thus question the wholeness of continuity of the restored tradition'.² Yet retro does not turn to a lost golden age in which 'traditional' values are to be found that need to be actualized in the present; rather, through a narrative of progress it positions the present as superior to the past. Through this differentiation, this chapter thus suggests that the 'nostalgia paradigm', established in a number of other national contexts, is not the most appropriate prism through which to understand Czech narratives of the socialist past on the level of cultural representation.

Trying to cast the present as either a continuity of the 'quality' entertainment of the socialist past or as a radical rupture was part of the controversies accompanying the rebroadcast of the television series *Třicet případů majora Zemana* (The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman, dir. Jiří Sequens, 1974–1979) on Czech Television in 1999–2000. These discussions, however, by no means hindered the continued consumption of the popular culture of the socialist period in the Czech Republic. After this initial rescreening, *Major Zeman* saw repeats on the private television channels *Prima* (2004–2005) and *Barrandov* (2009–2011; 2013–2014) and was released on DVD in 2007, when it came packaged with the

¹ Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko, 'The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Practices', *Ab Imperio* 4, no. 2 (2004), 487–519 (493).

² Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 45.

Sunday edition of the tabloid newspaper *Aha*.³ These events were accompanied by hardly any discussion in the press. Likewise, the first post-socialist rebroadcast of another propagandistic Normalization-era television series, *Žena za pultem* (The Woman Behind the Counter, dir. Jaroslav Dudek, 1977) in 2002 was the source of much less discord amongst press commentators.

Written by the prolific screenwriter Jaroslav Dietl, whom Paulina Bren has called 'Normalization's narrator',⁴ *Žena za pultem* presents a utopian vision of the commercial world of late socialism. Structured in twelve episodes over the course of one year in the life of shop assistant Anna Holubová, the series narrates a small-scale normalization of its own: the tumultuous events of the main protagonist's broken-down marriage are stabilized over the course of the series in a winter-time idyll where order is restored through the creation of a new family. Commentators have repeatedly pointed to the series' subliminal propaganda, which presented a distorted picture of socialist realities: the action is set in a well-stocked supermarket overflowing with luxury goods and staffed by an amiable team.⁵ The series thus raised similar objections from commentators as *Major Zeman* had at the time of rescreening, detailed in the previous chapter: it was perceived as spreading the ideological message of the Communist Party, not the least because the actress in the leading role, Jiřina Švorcová, was heavily associated with Communist Party politics. As a member of the Party's Central Committee and chair of the Union of Czech Dramatic Artists, as well as an active Party member after 1989, Švorcová's post-1989 reputation was largely negative.⁶

In spite of these factors, when *TV Prima* decided to rebroadcast the series in 2002, the overall press reaction was marked by a greater degree of indifference. On the one hand, this was the result of the fact that the series was rescreened on a

³ Jan Kohoutek, 'Veřejná polemika o uvedení seriálu Třicet případů majora Zemana v České televizi po roce 1989 (diskurzivní analýza českého celostátního tisku)', MA diss., Masaryk University Brno, 2011.

⁴ Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism After the 1968 Prague Spring* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010), 130-158.

⁵ See Jan Čulík, 'The Construction of Reality in Communist and Post-Communist Czech TV Serials', in *National Mythologies in Central European TV Series*, ed. Jan Čulík (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2013), 110-155 (110-127); Ina Marešová, 'Romance za pultem: Průvodce po třech reprezentativních prostorech normalizačních milostných příběhů', in *Tesilová kavalérie: popkulturní obrazy normalizace*, ed. Petr A. Bílek and Blanka Činátlová (Příbram: Pistorius & Olšanská, 2010), 83-94; Petr Bednařík and Irena Reifová, 'Normalizační televizní seriál: socialistická konstrukce reality', *Sborník Národního muzea v Praze, řada C – Literární historie* 53, no. 1-4 (2008): 71-74 (73).

⁶ See Mirka Spáčilová's profile of Švorcová, 'Koho ta žena ještě zajímá? Toť otázka' [Who is still interested in this woman? That's the question], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 2 October 2012, 8.

commercial television channel; the recontextualization of the series as a purely commercial product intended for profit seemed to aggravate critics less than Czech Television's supposedly edifying intentions with *Major Zeman*.⁷ Indeed, despite TV Nova's declaration that it would never rescreen *Major Zeman*, commercial television stations, and Czech Television as well, were happy to recycle less contested socialist television series throughout the 2000s, many of which also became available on DVD in this decade. As Irena Reifová has shown, re-runs have continually played an important role in Czech post-socialist television programming: between 1990 and 2005, 78% of all domestic series broadcast on Czech television were re-runs, which were shown initially for financial reasons, but even 'after 2000, "old", "socialist" serials represented more than 50 per cent of all repeated screenings'.⁸

On the other hand, the discussion raised by *Žena za pultem* also indicated a discursive shift which demonstrated a certain fatigue with issues of the moral value of socialist popular culture that had been repeatedly summoned in relation to *Major Zeman* as well as singers Michal David and Karel Gott in the previous decade.⁹ A repeated opinion suggested that Czech democracy is 'strong enough to bear the broadcast of the most propagandistic of series or the repeated publication of *Mein Kampf*'.¹⁰ Ondřej Drábek and Petr Čapek concluded in the daily *Hospodářské noviny*: 'The taboo, which was associated with such dramatic

⁷ Mirka Spáčilová, 'Žena za pultem se vrací' [The Woman Behind the Counter returns], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 2 August 2002, 6. A comparison with Germany was also raised, in which viewers were deemed to 'have enough good sense to orient themselves' within the ideology of socialist television production. See čtk, 'Totalitní' televizní seriály? ["Totalitarian" television series?], *Hospodářské noviny*, 17 March 2000, 7. See also, Ondřej Drábek and Petr Čapek, 'Návrat Ženy za pultem potvrzuje trend' [Return of Woman Behind the Counter confirms trend], *Hospodářské noviny*, 27 September 2002, 28.

⁸ Irena Reifová, 'Rerunning and "Re-Watching" Socialist TV Drama Serials: Post-Socialist Czech Television Audiences Between Commodification and Reclaiming the Past', *Critical Studies in Television* 4, no. 2 (2009): 53–71 (59–60).

⁹ See Marta Švagrová and Marcel Kabát, 'Seriály: staré dobré zboží' [Serials: Good old merchandise], *Lidové noviny*, 26 September 2002, 17. This article notes that a number of other socialist serials have been broadcast since *Major Zeman* and proposes that the educational format of the *Major Zeman* rebroadcast was unsuccessful and should not be repeated. In 'Švorcová posílila demokracii' [Švorcová has strengthened democracy] (*Mladá fronta Dnes*, 7 October 2002, 8), Jan Jandourek suggests that as far as *Žena za pultem* is concerned, there are no reasons speaking against showing the series.

¹⁰ Kamil Fila, 'Ideologie, která není vidět, ale působí' [Ideologically that cannot be seen, but works], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 9 August 2002, 7. See also Jan Jandourek, 'Švorcová posílila demokracii' [Švorcová has strengthened democracy], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 7 October 2002, 8.

production after November 1989, seems to be definitely gone'.¹¹ Indeed, *Žena za pultem* saw a very high rating – the rebroadcast of the first episode was watched by over 40% of television viewers.¹²

Clearly, the nostalgic practice of reconsuming the popular culture of the period had lost its controversial edge. Writing in 2010, Paulina Bren asserted that the debates of the late nineties were 'the first (and in many ways the last) public discussion of the recent past'.¹³ Since then, as the final chapter will demonstrate, the socialist past has once again become the site of public contestation towards the end of the 2000s, but at the beginning of the decade, both representations of socialism and popular culture from the period were accepted as part of the cultural landscape. This trend provides the setting for this chapter, which uses the temporal frame of the first decade of the twenty-first century and the early 2010s to interrogate the intersection of nostalgia for resistance and retro aesthetics in representing the socialist past. As I demonstrate, many of the retrospective representations of the socialist period produced since the 2000s capitalized precisely on the continued popularity and less problematic perception of socialist popular culture, which they incorporated and reworked into their own nostalgic narratives.

4.1 Irena Dousková's jolly anti-communism

Before entering the 2000s, a slight detour back into the 1990s is necessary. In 1998, Irena Dousková published the novel *Hrdý Budžes* (Beproud). The title of this novel is a play on the words *hrdý bud', žes* ('be proud that') from Stanislav Kostka Neumann's 1949 poem, which the young protagonist of the novel, eight-year-old Helenka Součková, constantly mishears. Told from Helenka's faux-naïve child's perspective, the book humorously details the period of the early 1970s in a provincial town near Prague. The reviews of the novel upon its publication, which were not numerous, remarked that the 'confrontation of the language of children

¹¹ Ondřej Drábek and Petr Čapek, 'Návrat Ženy za pultem potvrzuje trend' [Return of Woman Behind the Counter confirms trend], *Hospodářské noviny*, 27 September 2002, 28.

¹² Jan Potůček, 'Ženu za pultem sledovaly téměř dva miliony diváků' [Woman Behind the Counter watched by also two millions viewers], *Lidové noviny*, 5 October 2002, 4.

¹³ Bren, 9.

with the language of adults is a building block of humouristic literature',¹⁴ and likened Dousková's style to the canonical prose of Karel Poláček.¹⁵

While the meagre number of reviews indicates that the publication of the novel did not make a large impact, Dousková became much more widely known when she adapted *Hrdý Budžes* for the stage in 2002. Premiered in Příbram, the town where Dousková grew up, and where *Hrdý Budžes*, under the fictive guise of the name Ničín, is set, the play soon became a cult production. In 2004, the daily *Mladá fronta Dnes* reported that *Hrdý Budžes* has 'become a phenomenon on the Czech theatre scene',¹⁶ quoting the large number of repeat showings and the fact that the show was sold out for months in advance. That a major daily chose to cover a provincial show attests to the play's significance. A recording of the production was broadcast on Czech Television on 8 November 2003. The leading actress Barbora Hrzánová, who portrayed eight-year-old Helenka, won the prestigious *Thalia* award in the same year,¹⁷ and the production moved from the provincial theatre in Příbram to Prague's Theatre without Balustrades in 2003, a popular commercial theatre, where it has now been showing for over ten years. In 2006, Dousková published *Oněgin byl Rusák* (*Onegin Was a Russki*), a sequel to *Hrdý Budžes*, which now saw Helenka in the final year of her high school studies in 1980s Prague. The novel was once again successfully adapted for the stage and has been showing at the Theatre in Dlouhá since its premiere in 2008.¹⁸

The tragi-comic treatment of socialism in Dousková's texts was likened to Michal Viewegh's *Báječná léta pod psa* several times by reviewers, as well as to Petr Šabach or the films of Jan Hřebejk.¹⁹ The setting of Dousková's popular texts amongst these authors attests to the consolidation of a benign, humorous

¹⁴ Anna Dušková, 'A Hrdý Budžes vytrval' [And Hrdý Budžes persisted], *Literární noviny* 10, no. 4 (1999), 7. See also Milan Jungmann, 'NEON stále bez záře', *Týden* 6, no. 8 (1999), 59; Aleš Hama, 'Poláčekovské téma z jiné perspektivy' [A Poláčekian topic from a different perspective], *Nové knihy* 39, no. 1 (1999), 4; Jiří Brabec, 'Druhá původní novinka...' [Second original new book], *Literární noviny* 10, no. 7 (1999), 16.

¹⁵ Poláček is, among numerous other works, author of the 1943 popular children's prose *Bylo nás pět* (There were five of us), which Dousková's use of colloquial language can be seen as referencing.

¹⁶ Fk, 'Hrdý Budžes se stal fenoménem' [Hrdý Budžes has become a phenomenon], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 19 May 2004, 8.

¹⁷ <http://www.ceny-thalie.cz/historie.php> [accessed 11 May 2014].

¹⁸ As of November 2015, both *Hrdý Budžes* and *Oněgin byl Rusák* were still featured in the regular programme in their respective theatres.

¹⁹ Jiří P. Kříž, 'Budžes nebyl indián ani partyzán' [Hrdý Budžes was neither an Indian nor a partisan], *Právo*, 18 December 2002, 15; Ondřej Horák, 'Další nemilé věci Helenky Součkové' [Helenka Součková's further displeasing things], *Lidové noviny*, 11 April 2006, 18; Pavel Mandys, 'Mladá intelektuálka, úchylové, komouši' [A young intellectual, perverts and commies], *Týden*, 10 April 2006, 84.

representational discourse on the socialist past, even to the point of over-saturation. Already in 2002, in an article entitled 'Nelze donekonečna dolovat humor z absurdit socialismu' ('It's not possible to mine jokes out of the absurdities of socialism forever') theatre critic Jana Machalická complained that the topic had already been dealt with 'earlier, more aptly, and more humorously'²⁰ by authors including Viewegh and Šabach. However, the continued repeats of both *Hrdý Budžes* and *Oněgin byl Rusák*, as well as the production of a number of other representations that operate with humour to portray socialism in this period, demonstrate that audiences were indeed still willing to 'mine jokes' from the past.

Like Viewegh, Dousková uses the discrepancy between a child's or teenager's view and that of their parents to generate humour. This strategy produced a particularly marked political interpretation of the period portrayed. Helenka naïvely demands to be allowed to partake in communist rituals, as she does not understand their political dimension, while reproducing the anti-communist discourse her parents teach her at home, and which the text asks the audience to sympathize with. For example, Helenka complains of her mother that '[she] doesn't want to allow me to go to the Little Sparks [the younger version of the Pioneers – my note], because the Little Sparks and Pioneers are little communists. Well, I dunno, in my class the whole class goes there and I'd like to go there too'.²¹ Dousková generates a nostalgia for the period which lies in a fascination with its outward, formal characteristics – its form and symbolism, here the institution of the Little Sparks – but not its content. This seemingly contradictory impulse – that anti-communism can coexist with nostalgia – was striking also in a number of reviews, which praised Dousková's indulgent and humorous view of the period while also approving of her interpretation of the socialist past which condemned everything associated with the communist establishment.²²

²⁰ Jana Machalická, 'Nelze donekonečna dolovat humor z absurdit socialismu' [It's not possible to mine jokes out of the absurdities of socialism forever], *Lidové noviny*, 14 November 2002, 25.

²¹ '(...)mi nechce dovolit chodit do jiskřiček, protože jiskřičky a pionýři jsou prý malý komunisti. Tak já nevím, z naší třídy tam chodí celá třída a já bych tam taky chtěla chodit'. Irena Dousková, *Hrdý Budžes* (Brno: Petrov, 2002), 9.

²² Radim Kopáč, 'Co s hnusnou dobou?' [What to do with a revolting time?], *Právo*, 28 April 2006, 8; Vladimír Mikulka, 'Scénky a písničky z hnusné doby' [Scenes and songs from revolting times], *Divadelní noviny* 17, no. 4 (2008), 4; Jana Paterová, 'Cesta do študákovy duše 80. let' [A trip into a 1980s student's soul], *Lidové noviny*, 20 January 2008, 18.

This tendency was captured in a minor controversy that erupted after Barbora Hrzánová, the actress playing Helenka, paraphrased the script of the play in her televised acceptance speech at the *Thalia* award ceremony: 'I'm really happy that I'm doing this show, because saying in public that the Russkis and communists are bastards, only you're not allowed to say it..., it feels so good after all those years that I wish all of you could try it'.²³ Dousková's comedies thus perpetuate a situation in which audiences indulge a benevolent laughter at something they at the same time denounce. It is precisely this humorous indulgence which is key to identifying such texts as nostalgic. In *Oněgin*, this becomes even more marked, as Helenka is no longer a naïve child who wants to join the Little Sparks without realizing the political implications, but an opinionated teenager whose anti-communism is a matter of course, though her courage in expressing this conviction is limited to gestures of teenage rebellion, such as displaying a sign saying 'EAT A LOT – THERE WON'T BE MORE'²⁴ in a May Day parade. The case of Dousková and her popularity shows not only how wide-spread this particular representational strategy of socialism had become, but in its (public and paratextual) condemnation of communism, it also brought home the pedagogical character of this seemingly nostalgic discourse, which aims to educate its recipients towards a 'correct' interpretation of history.

4.2 Petty heroism: overcoming the narrative impossibility of Normalization

Comedies about socialism - whether written or cinematic - overwhelmingly turn to the period of so-called Normalization, i.e. the last twenty years of state socialism, from the definitive end of the Prague Spring in 1969 to the fall of the communist regime in 1989, which saw a return to a more hard-line regime under the rule of Gustáv Husák following the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968. Michal Viewegh's *Báječná léta pod psa* (1992), a number of Petr Šabach's short stories, Jan Svěrák's *Kolja* (1996), Jan Hřebejk's *Pupendo* (2003), Irena Pavlásková's *Zemský ráj to napohled* (An Earthly Paradise for the Eyes, 2009), Ondřej Trojan's *Občanský průkaz* (The Identity Card, 2010), Richard Řeřicha's *Don't Stop* (2012), the

²³ František Žák, 'Příbramská Helenka pobouřila komunisty' [Příbram's Helenka has angered communists], *Příbramský deník*, 22 April 2004, 15.

²⁴ 'JEZTE HODNĚ – NEBUDE'. Irena Dousková, *Oněgin byl Rusák* (Brno: Druhé město, 2006), 211.

television series *Vyprávěj* (Tell Me a Story, 2009-2013) – all of these are predominantly set in the 1970s or 1980s.

Yet unlike the hopes and disappointments associated with the building of socialism in the 1950s, the political crimes and persecutions of the same decade, or the cultural and political rebirth of the 1960s, late socialism is marked by a peculiar lack of large historical events which these comedies can narrate. The year 1977, in which the until then fragmented dissident movement coalesced around the manifesto *Charter 77*, could be seen as one significant marker that punctures this period. Yet dissent has been taken up as a subject of representation only infrequently. This fact is linked not only to the unresolved legacy of dissent in the Czech public sphere, but also to a general wariness towards portraying heroes in comedies, a feature of Czech representational culture I will return to.

Scholars generally tend to agree that Normalization was marked by a strong distinction between the public and the private, both on the level of everyday life and state-sponsored policy.²⁵ According to this popular conception, the Normalization regime concluded a 'social contract' with the people, placating them with consumer goods and an officially sanctioned retreat into privacy, in exchange for a display of outward loyalty towards the socialist system.²⁶ In comparison, the period of the 1960s and in particular the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968 provides narrative possibilities which transcend this dominant discourse of a withdrawal into the private; I will discuss the 'grand narrative' of 1968 and its affective power in the final section of this chapter. Normalization, however, is characterized by a suspended temporality in popular discourse, frozen in a state of stasis, where very few major events penetrate this period of 'eventlessness'. The period is often referred to with the term *bezčasí* (timelessness), a popular preconception that was recently figured by the third part of the Czech Television documentary *Rok 68* (The

²⁵ Paulina Bren argues that after 1968, the mutually interdependent desire of state and people for normality led to the widespread ethos of the 'quiet life', which meant 'not merely acceptance of what was most certainly another descriptive cliché of the time – people's political apathy – but the state's active endorsement of it. The call for calm and order, and the way in which it became synonymous with normalization, was not merely programmatic; it was also ideological'. Bren, 89.

²⁶ Antonín Liehm, 'The New Social Contract and the Parallel Polity', in *Dissent in Eastern Europe*, ed. Jane Leftwich Curry (New York: Praeger, 1983), 172-181. See also, Lubomír Kopeček, *Éra nevinnosti: Česká politika 1989-1997* (Brno: Barrister & Principal, 2010), 11; Milan Otáhal, *Opozice, moc, společnost 1969-1989: příspěvek k dějinám 'normalizace'* (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 1994), 33.

Year 1968), which bore ‘Timelessness’ as its title, and which, according to the promotional caption, portrays the ‘suffocating atmosphere of “Normalization”’.²⁷

The atmosphere of late socialism is usually represented through grey, that least expressive of colours. Exemplified in a 2013 production of Prague’s Theatre on the Balustrades entitled *Šedá sedmdesátá, aneb Husákovo ticho* (Grey Seventies or Husák’s Quiet)²⁸, this colour attribution refers to the material universe of the period, while the metaphor of quietness also points to a perceived lack of eventfulness. Journalist Jiří Peňás’s comment in an interview about the series *Vyprávěj* confirms the widespread popular prejudice about the colour scheme of Normalization: ‘one of the distinctive signs of communist civilization in the Soviet Bloc was that its industry was not able to produce nice bold colours’.²⁹ The Theatre on the Balustrades thus contrasts late socialism with its previous production, *Zlatá šedesátá* (Golden Sixties),³⁰ portraying a decade of dynamic reform, and through this colour metaphor pointing to the different set of valences the 1960s bear in the Czech popular imagination.

This is by no means an argument to say that everyday life during Normalization did actually empirically lack eventfulness for those who lived through it; I am rather pointing to a prevalent popular mythology perpetuated to an extent already by the popular culture of the period. The narrative poverty of Normalization – or rather the possibilities of what could be said under censorship requirements and the relative stability of ‘real existing’ socialism – was evident in contemporary representations of everyday life. A prime example of this aesthetic is, as Daniel Just has shown, the cinematic adaptation of Bohumil Hrabal’s *Slavnosti sněženek* (The Snowdrop Festival) by Jiří Menzel in 1983, which saw an absolute lack of plot development, focusing instead on the most mundane of everyday occurrences.³¹ Indeed, several of Menzel’s other films made in the 1970s and 1980s, either adapted from Hrabal’s prose or scripted by Zdeněk Svěrák, feature

²⁷ *Rok 1968*, episode 3, ‘Bezčasí’, <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/10192661914-rok-68/20756226862-bezcasi/> [accessed 14 March 2014].

²⁸ Jan Mikulášek and Dana Viceníková, *Šedá sedmdesátá aneb Husákovo ticho*. Theatre on the Balustrades, dir. Jan Mikulášek, 2013.

²⁹ Jana Machalická et al., ‘Vyprávěj: policejní režim s lidskou tváří’ [Vyprávěj: a police régime with a human face], *Lidové noviny*, 30 October 2010, 28.

³⁰ Pavel Juráček, *Zlatá šedesátá aneb Deník Pavla J.* Theatre on the Balustrades, dir. Jan Mikulášek, 2013.

³¹ Daniel Just, ‘Art and Everydayness: Popular Culture and Daily life in Communist Czechoslovakia’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 6 (2012): 703-720 (706).

everyday 'non-heroes' as protagonists.³² Even the aforementioned series *Žena za pultem*, which was first screened in the same year as the publication of Charter 77, is structured purely around everyday events in the heroine Anna's personal and professional life. The brimming supermarket in which the story is set presents a society where time stands still: the grand narratives which marked the period after the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia are a thing of the past. Now in real existing socialism, as Anna tells her bosses, 'we have stores which we wouldn't even have dreamt about'.³³ Thus public time is suspended; only the personal and the intimate structures the everyday. Where no sustained narrative can be drawn, the narrative mode of Normalization timelessness becomes supremely episodic, a strategy that is also employed by retrospective representations.

The chief representative of the episode as a genre is undoubtedly Petr Šabach, one of the most prominent Czech raconteurs of socialism, whose works have been adapted for the screen several times by screenwriter Petr Jarchovský.³⁴ Recounting stories over a glass of beer is how Šabach's characters most often communicate and how his narrators impart the narrative to the reader. His works are comprised of a series of loosely linked reminiscences on the pleasures of youth, they embody the small stories and personal memory that Kamil Činátl has identified as emblematic of the narrative possibilities of Normalization.³⁵ To generate narrative, Šabach uses gestures of resistance against the regime to structure the eventlessness of the period. In this section, I will focus primarily on Šabach's novella *Občanský průkaz* (The Identity Card, 2006) and its subsequent film adaptation (dir. Ondřej Trojan, 2010), and Jan Hřebejk's 2003 film *Pupendo*, loosely based on Šabach's 2001 prose *Opilé banány* (Drunken Bananas), though these observations are equally applicable to other Šabach-Jarchovský films, and indeed to the wider corpus of comedic texts about the socialist past.

Historical representations inherently lack a certain amount of suspense as the course of events is already known; as Sune Bechmann Pedersen has expressed

³² These include, for example, *Postřižiny* (Cutting it Short, dir. Jiří Menzel, 1980), *Na samotě u lesa* (Secluded, Near Woods, dir. Jiří Menzel, 1976), *Vesničko má středisková* (My Sweet Little Village, dir. Jiří Menzel, 1985).

³³ '(...) máme prodejnny, o kterých se nám ani nesnilo'. *Žena za pultem*, 1977, Episode 12.

³⁴ These adaptations include *Jackal Years* (Šakalí léta, dir. Jan Hřebejk, 1993); *Cosy Dens* (Cosy Dens, dir. Jan Hřebejk, 1999); *Pupendo* (dir. Jan Hřebejk, 2003); *The Identity Card* (Občanský průkaz, dir. Ondřej Trojan, 2010).

³⁵ Kamil Činátl, 'Časy normalizace', in *Tesilová kavalérie: popkulturní obrazy normalizace*, ed. Petr A. Bílek and Blanka Činátlová (Příbram: Pistorius & Olšanská, 2010), 166-187 (167).

it, 'the standard solution to this problem is to embed a melodrama within a historical epic'.³⁶ But what to do where there is no epic? Representations of Normalization float in the 'timelessness' described above, often lacking specific historical grounding within the two final decades of socialism. Their narratives thus become purely personal. In such a scenario we may ask what is the purpose of setting such personal narratives in the past, if the stories they tell do not hinge on large historical events. In other words, to what end is Normalization narrated as a time when nothing happened? My argument is that such a narration leads to a specific political interpretation: at a time where there are few large events with accompanying heroes to focus on, the mantle of heroism is taken on by 'ordinary' characters, and the population at large is thus seen as collectively taking an exemplary stance of resistance against an authoritarian regime.

Gestures of resistance in Šabach's narratives function to create clear hierarchies for his characters – the more protagonists define themselves against the ruling authorities, the more the reader is asked to sympathize with them. Such resistance against the communist regime is a significant object of nostalgia in the Czech context. In the previous chapter, I identified the trope of petty heroism – small and passing resistant gestures – as prevalent across a number of representations, from *Kolja* and *Pelíšky* to 'resistant responses' to *Major Zeman*. This trope is one of the instances where representations which otherwise demonstrate a largely non-affective surface fascination with the aesthetics of socialism indulge moments of more sentimental longing for a specific aspect of the socialist past.

Already Michal Viewegh's 1992 novel *Báječná léta pod psa* generated comic effects through petty heroic gestures and their failure, where the moral dilemmas of the characters are treated with a deprecating humour. For instance, the character of the father of the protagonist Kvido experiences his greatest moment of heroism when he and Kvido's mother accidentally run into Pavel Kohout, the hounded playwright and dissident, who has been banished to the provincial town they live in, and accept his invitation to visit him. Kvido's parents display a certain ambiguity about their feelings in regards to resistant gestures: 'Later, following a reprise, they failed to agree who had seen the persecuted playwright first and so

³⁶ Sune Bechmann Pedersen, *Reel Socialism: Making Sense of History in Czech and German Cinema since 1989* (Lund: Lund University/Media-Tryck, 2015), 96-97.

should have given the signal to retreat in time'.³⁷ The narrator further comments on the conflicting emotions involved: "If I wanted to cosy up to enemies of the regime, I could have stayed in Prague," Kvido's father lamented for appearance's sake, but somewhat in thrall to his own civic pluck'.³⁸ The father's heroism is then humorously deflated in the scene of the actual visit in Kohout's garden, when he tries to disguise his growing fear of the situation by loudly appreciating the food, only to nervously vomit into the hedge moments later. Here, heroism ultimately fails. Petty heroism thus contributes to an ironic mode in that it creates self-deprecating humorous situations, which in turn support the comedic representational strategy of the socialist period that is particularly widespread in the Czech context.

Such petty heroism finds its precursor in interpretations of the overly eager compliance with authority of Jaroslav Hašek's Švejk as a display of subversion. Švejk's apparently imbecilic servility and over-identification with the orders he is given by his superiors or any figures of authority is reminiscent of what Alexei Yurchak terms *stiob* in the late Soviet context: 'a peculiar form of irony that differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision, or any of the more familiar genres of absurd humour. It required such a degree of overidentification with the object, person, or idea at which the *stiob* was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two'.³⁹ Švejk is so compelling as a character precisely because of this peculiar mixture, though, as Erica Weitzman remarks, 'most critical readers of *The Good Soldier Švejk* find the subversiveness of the novel (and it is no doubt subversive) in imagining its central character as a sort of trickster figure, a carefree troublemaker who under the veneer of innocence manages each time to undermine the army's activities and justificatory logic, turning every onerous task into an opportunity for

³⁷ 'Později, když si střetnutí znovu rekapitulovali, se nedokázali shodnout, kdo z nich pronásledovaného dramatika uviděl jako první a měl tedy včas vyhlásit signál k ústupu'. Michal Viewegh, *Báječná léta pod psa* (Prague: Český spisovatel, 1995), 126-127. The above translation is taken from Michal Viewegh, *Bliss Was It in Bohemia*, trans. David Short (London: Jantar Publishing, 2015), 153.

³⁸ "Kdybych se chtěl přátelit s oponenty režimu, mohl jsem zůstat v Praze," hořekoval naoko Kvidův otec, trochu okouzlený vlastní občanskou odvahou'. Ibid., 130. Above translation from *Bliss Was It in Bohemia*, 157.

³⁹ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 250-251.

the promotion of his own well-being'.⁴⁰ Considering the place that Švejk has gained in the Czech canon as a representative of national identity, such an interpretation certainly has more flattering implications than viewing him as simply the imbecile he claims to be.⁴¹

Gestures of attempted or intended, though not necessarily successful heroism, have also been employed in canonical narratives of the Second World War. Josef Škvorecký famously builds on the Švejkian tradition with his character of Danny Smiřický, protagonist of the novel *Zbabělci* (The Cowards), the title of which already betrays the attitude towards heroism this text takes. Set during the last days of the War, the small town where Danny lives is preparing for an uprising, but all he can think about is his love, Irena, and that acting heroically would impress her: 'I didn't have anything against an uprising. But that was the only good reason I could see for fighting for any patriotic or strategic reasons. The Germans had already lost the war anyway, so it didn't make any sense. It was only because of Irena that I wanted to get into it. To show off'.⁴²

Indeed, as discussed in chapter 2, there is a certain distrust towards heroes in Czech national mythology in keeping with what Ladislav Holý identifies as the 'egalitarian ethos'⁴³ in Czech culture. In his exploration of Czech historical myths, Jiří Rak traces this ethos to the historical absence of an aristocracy and relatively weak bourgeoisie in the Bohemian and Moravian social make-up, characteristics that were seized upon by the National Revival of the nineteenth century, which celebrated the 'simple' Czech people.⁴⁴ If there are any heroes to be found in the Czech historical canon that were equally lauded during the National Revival, the interwar First Republic, and the period of Communist Party rule, it was the Hussite movement. But particularly the Communist Party's efforts to interpret Hus and his followers as proto-communists defending ordinary people against oppressors discredited this heroic narrative to a large extent.⁴⁵ In the post-socialist period it

⁴⁰ Erica Weitzman, 'Imperium Stupidum: Švejk, Satire, Sabotage', *Law and Literature* 18, no. 2 (2006): 117-148 (118).

⁴¹ For instance, Radko Pytlík, who has written extensively on Hašek and Švejk, offers an extremely positive interpretation of the character when he claims that Švejk is 'an expression of a generous, deep humanity, which is connected with the transfer from an old world into a new one'. Radko Pytlík, *Jaroslav Hašek a Dobrý voják Švejk* (Prague: Panorama, 1983), 60.

⁴² Josef Škvorecký, *The Cowards*, trans. Jeanne Němcová (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 27.

⁴³ Ladislav Holý, *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation: National Identity and the Post-Communist Transformation of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 72-73.

⁴⁴ Jiří Rak, *Bývali Čechové: české historické mýty a stereotypy* (Jinočany: H&H, 1994), 85.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

was predominantly the Confederation of Political Prisoners who attempted to pursue a heroic narrative of anti-communist resistance fighters, and one popular representation, the television series *Zdivočelá země* built on these efforts. The general resistance to heroism translates into comedic representations in a certain refusal to acknowledge exceptionalism, which may account for the discomfort in portraying the exception of dissidence within the framework of Normalization. I will argue in the final chapter of this thesis that Czech representational culture did eventually experience a turn towards grand heroic narratives towards the end of the 2000s, but comedies generally stayed away from heroic motifs.

In Šabach's work, heroism remains petty, on the level of slightly subversive jokes, akin to what George Orwell described as 'tiny revolutions', where a joke 'in some way that is not actually offensive or frightening (...) upsets the established order'.⁴⁶ This is best illustrated in the novella *Občanský průkaz*, where a group of male friends, whom the text follows from their teenage years in the late 1960s into adulthood – enact their own tiny revolutions every day, in ways that temporarily upset the established order, but never pose a sustained challenge. The subversive gestures these characters engage in could be referred to by the Czech term *švejkovina*, denoting a Švejk-like prank. The novella opens with a scene in which the unnamed narrator and his friends receive their identity cards from a policeman in an official ceremony. In a gambit with echoes of *stioh*, the characters perform a prank in which they over-identify with the form of the ceremony, squeezing the policeman's hand so tightly when shaking it that they crack his knuckles. The difference here between the subtle parody of *stioh*, or indeed Švejk, is that there is no dilemma about where the characters position themselves and how their acts should be interpreted. Writing in relation to the film adaptation, Petr Lukeš notes: 'the antipathy of the heroes towards the regime is a matter of course, we do not witness any hesitation or doubt'.⁴⁷ The resistant gestures of Šabach's characters always reaffirm their a priori anti-communist stance, which the text assumes the reader shares with them.

The novella is a nostalgic celebration of the pleasures of youth and the narrator repeatedly reminds the reader that no matter the circumstances, being

⁴⁶ George Orwell, 'Funny, But Not Vulgar', in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: Vol. 3, As I Please, 1943-1945*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), 283-288 (284).

⁴⁷ Petr Lukeš, 'Bylo nebylo' [Once upon a time], *Host*, no. 1 (2011): 96.

young was always fun: “Those were good times. Hangovers were usually laughable, one just threw up a bit in the morning and then simply went on. What more can one wish for?”⁴⁸ To an extent, Šabach thus uses the most obvious mechanism for generating nostalgia, namely reminiscing about youth gone by. Adolescent rebellion and intergenerational conflict remain timeless themes not tied to any particular political system and much nostalgia looks back at precisely this life stage. As Boym observes, nostalgia ‘is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams’.⁴⁹ What Boym refers to is the intuitive fact that when turning to an earlier, distinct time, the most natural period in an individual’s biography is precisely the time of youth. This seems to constitute a qualitatively different experience to adulthood, often through the dreams Boym mentions, which may be articulated precisely through the desire to differentiate oneself from existing forms of authority. However, in Czech representations of socialism, it is not only young people who feel the need to define themselves against authority; as further examples will demonstrate, this is a feature which serves to elicit sympathy for protagonists of all age groups. An essential ingredient of this nostalgia are thus also the unpleasant, directly oppressive aspects of the regime: the episodic narrative of *Občanský průkaz* is structured around the encounters of the narrator and his friends with the police and details the ways in which they, through more or less petty heroic gestures, managed to outwit the authorities. The text thus nostalgically captures the excitement that carrying out semi-legal activities afforded in an authoritarian regime.

To an extent, these activities seem devoid of any conscious political meaning – the characters’ actions are motivated simply through an apparently innate teenage desire to rebel. Resistance is portrayed as peer pressure, as a means of achieving appreciation in one’s friendship group. For example, the narrator’s friend Venca suggests to the group that they should all tear out page thirteen from their identity card booklets, because ‘the thirteenth congress of the KSČ is coming up, and if you have page thirteen torn out, it means: I disagree with

⁴⁸ “To byly dobré časy. Kocoviny bejvávaly v tý době většinou k smíchu, člověk si ráno prostě ublink a pak zas pokračoval dál. Co víc si člověk může přát?”. Petr Šabach, *Občanský průkaz* (Prague and Litomyšl: Paseka, 2006), 43.

⁴⁹ Boym, xv.

the regime!⁵⁰ When the rest of the group are somewhat taken aback by this, it transpires that Venca was boasting too much: ‘All of my brother’s mates tore *the edge* of page number thirteen (emphasis is my own).’⁵¹ Reminiscent of Danny Smiřický’s petty motives for wanting to become a hero, the attempted act of heroism is humorously deflated by Venca’s admission that he is essentially only trying to imitate his older brother (whose heroism is also put into question by not going as far as to tear out the whole page), rather than extending a genuine political gesture. However, it is precisely the regime, with its multitude of rules and limitations, which is nostalgically looked back upon as a facilitator of teenage rebellion, as it always provided clear boundaries of what was permissible, and what already bore the irresistible tinge of resistance. Thus the narrator can be satisfied with his circumstances, commenting on the group’s attendance at the anti-regime youth festival Majáles: ‘We were fourteen years old and we thought: “Yeah, this is exactly it! We’re in the right place to be alive!”’⁵²



Figure 9. *Občanský průkaz* (The Identity Card). Ondřej Trojan (director) and Petr Jarchovský (screenwriter), 2010.

⁵⁰ ‘(...) teď bude třináctej sjezd ká es cé, a když máš vytrženou stránku třináct, tak to znamená: Nesouhlasím s režimem!’ Šabach, 8.

⁵¹ ‘Všichni kámoši mého bráchy si natrhli stránku číslo třináct’. Šabach, 9.

⁵² ‘Bylo nám čtrnáct a říkali sme si: „Jo, přesně tohle je vono. Sme na správném místě k žítí!”’ Šabach, 34.

By this logic, the more strictures the regime imposes, the easier it is to display resistance. The relatively liberal period of the Prague Spring receives the same treatment in the novella as the ensuing years of Normalization; if anything, the repression of Normalization only reinforces the narrative structure, as now, in the new hard-line regime, the police represent even more obviously something against which the characters can define themselves. As Eliška Juříková notes, the narrative drive arises from ‘the need to boast about dangers overcome, about how difficult the situations we have managed to live through were, and with how many absurdities we met in their course’.⁵³ Even once the narrative moves into the characters’ adulthood, the narrator still brags that he holds the neighbourhood record in the number of times he was brought to the police station. It is thus no surprise that screenwriter Petr Jarchovský and director Ondřej Trojan chose to set the film adaptation in the 1970s only, the more hard-line time of late socialism, which also provides the very readily visually recognizable framework for portraying resistance in the form of the underground music movement, with which the protagonists sympathize, marked by long hair and a distinctive dress style (Fig. 9).

Šabach’s ability to generate nostalgia rests on the total identification he expects with his protagonists from the reader. We laugh with the protagonists when they make a good joke, but their behaviour is never exposed as ridiculous in the same way as that of the police, whom we laugh at. The petty heroism of the characters reconfirms a binary vision of the past, where, as reviewer Aleš Smutný has effectively captured it, ‘the communists and their sympathizers are either unconditionally stupid, insidious, or ugly, or a combination of all of the above. Conversely, those who resist the regime are noble, vulnerable, humane, and in their core kind and understanding. (...) One then has to ask where these communists came from, if they were all so stupid and primitive’.⁵⁴ The kind of anti-communism that Dousková promoted under the veneer of nostalgia for the form of socialism is here inscribed into the very narrative structure of Šabach’s text: in order to sympathize with the protagonists, the reader is automatically placed on the ‘right’ side of those who resisted the regime. Each exploit of the characters

⁵³ Eliška F. Juříková, ‘O esenbácích, estébácích a dalších fízlech’ [On policeman, secret policemen and other cops], *Host* 12, no. 9 (2006): 37.

⁵⁴ Aleš Smutný, ‘Občanský průkaz’ [The Identity Card], *Cinema* 20, no. 11 (2010), 24.

against authority constitutes a self-enclosed episode, and it is these episodes of resistance that enable the time-span of Normalization to be structured and narrated. Ondřej Trojan's 2010 film adaptation of the novella only underscores this episodic structure by transposing Šabach's narrative into the 1970s, thus avoiding representing the grand historical narrative of 1968.

Nostalgia for resistance is certainly not unique to the Czech Republic and indeed, as nostalgia finds a grateful locus in the period of youth and its accompanying rebellion against authority, it is somewhat thematically inevitable as a longing for a period that will never return. Russian retrospective representations of the Soviet Union have done the same: the rebellion of the *stilyagi*, fashionable urban youths in 1950s Moscow in Valerii Todorovskii's eponymous film (2008) against the uniformity and conformism of the Komsomol structures much of the narrative; in *Dom Solntsa* (House of the Sun, dir. Garik Sukachev, 2010), Sasha, a girl from a well-placed Moscow family, is seduced by the countercultural appeal of the hippy Solntsa and his gang; the Polish film *Wszystko, co kocham* (All That I love, dir. Jacek Borcuch, 2009) also sees some of the happiest moments of the main protagonist Janek's adolescence take place as he achieves recognition and self-realization in a politically subversive punk band. Even more similarly to *Občanský průkaz*, Leander Haußmann's *Sonnenallee* (1999), perhaps the inaugural film of the *Ostalgie* wave, is predicated on main character Micha and his friends' opposition to the local border guard in their East Berlin street, who intentionally makes life difficult for them. However, the *Ostalgie* literature does not identify this nostalgia for opposition against the regime as a significant feature in the debate and the kind of underlying anti-communist dynamic I observe in Czech representations of socialism lacks attention in the German context. Interpretations of nostalgia in Germany focus on salvaging the positive aspects of the GDR such as its social values of a promise of a more just society; they fail to recognize that it is the negative aspects of state socialism that can generate a nostalgia of their own kind.

Paul Cooke argues that the warm memories of the GDR that *Sonnenallee* projects are made acceptable by the universally recognizable framework of first love in which it is shrouded.⁵⁵ The overall nostalgic rationale of the film, which lies

⁵⁵ Paul Cooke, 'Performing "Ostalgie": Leander Hausmann's *Sonnenallee*', *German Life and Letters* 56, no. 2 (2003): 156-167 (162).

wholly in the sphere of the private, is perhaps best expressed in Micha's closing voiceover commentary: 'It was the nicest time of my life, for I was young and in love'.⁵⁶ Similarly, *Good Bye, Lenin!* (dir. Wolfgang Becker, 2003) provides an emotional frame through main character Alex's attachment to his ill mother, for whom he reconstructs the GDR after the fall of the Wall. *Občanský průkaz* avoids this kind of sentimentalization which would generate an affective nostalgic mood. Although screenwriter Jarchovský introduces a subplot of first love for the main protagonist Petr, this does not play as prominent a role as the exploits of the peer group.



Figure 10. *Pupendo*. Jan Hřebejk (director) and Petr Jarchovský (screenwriter), 2003.

Yet nostalgia for resistance can be seen across practically all humorous representations of socialism in the Czech context. Jan Hřebejk's film *Pupendo* (2003) is perhaps more self-deprecating than *Občanský průkaz* and offers a multi-layered examination of the mechanism of petty heroism. The film dramatizes the daily life of the 'grey zone' of semi-dissent through vignettes of the family of out-of-favour sculptor Mára, who has given up on his art, and floats through the early 1980s fairly contentedly with a combination of small commercial commissions, functional alcoholism, and fishing. Critics praised the film for painting a less black-and-white moral image of the period through the introduction of the family of

⁵⁶ 'Es war die schönste Zeit meines Lebens, denn ich war jung und verliebt'. *Sonnenallee*, 1999.

opportunist headmaster Míla Břečka, who would also like to resist the system, but fears to do so overtly. Yet despite this moral fuzziness, the film leads the viewer to sympathize with Mára's resistance as opposed to Břečka's cowardice, literally shining a kindly light on the somewhat romantic vision of the everyday state of semi-dissent he lives in (Fig. 10).

In a memorable scene, Mára and Břečka argue about who is a bigger hero. Having been commissioned to install a mosaic of spring motifs in the school where Břečka teaches, Mára challenges the headmaster to write a 'message to future generations',⁵⁷ which he will then hide in the mosaic. Knowing that no one will ever read this message and that this act of resistance is destined to remain completely private and secret, Břečka suddenly feels able to speak freely. 'Not all commies are the same. Some people enter [the Party] to soften it from the inside, mate, some sacrifice themselves!'⁵⁸ he tells Mára boisterously. As a result of Mára's egging, Břečka writes a note stating that 'Communism is crap and Bolsheviks are swine',⁵⁹ and adds that 'Headmaster Míla Břečka was forced to feign loyalty in the interests of thousands of children although internally he was always opposed',⁶⁰ which he then hands over to Mára, who slips it into a crack in the wall. What we see here is a deferral of the enemy. For those who perceive themselves as not implicated in the system, communists are always the Other, someone else – but certainly not 'us'. Břečka, who is a member of the Communist Party also externalizes communism – he is a 'better' kind of communist, exculpated through his insignificant gesture. In this instance we laugh at his hypocrisy, which is later compounded by his panic when building works threaten to dislodge the mosaic, thus risking the discovery of the message. Reeling off all the possible damaging consequences to Mára, Břečka convinces the sculptor to immediately go and remove the paper, and then proceeds to swallow it in good measure. While Břečka is an object of ridicule here, anti-communism is a given through the character of the stoic Mára, who unlike the ambitious headmaster has little to lose, and whose somewhat more genuine semi-dissidence becomes the default position from which socialism is retrospectively narrated.

⁵⁷ 'Poselství budoucím generacím', *Pupendo*, 2003.

⁵⁸ 'Není komouš jako komouš. Někdo tam vstoupí proto, aby to změkčoval zevnitř, vole, někdo se obětuje!' Ibid.

⁵⁹ 'Komunismus je svinstvo a bolševici jsou svině'. Ibid.

⁶⁰ 'Ředitel školy, Míla Břečka, byl nucen v zájmu tisíců dětí předstírat loajalitu, ačkoliv vnitřně byl vždycky proti'. Ibid.

Irena Pavlásková's film *Zemský ráj to napohled* (An Earthly Paradise for the Eyes, 2009), turns to the milieu of dissent in the 1970s explicitly. Here again, resistance against the regime is the only narrative feature which can structure the eventlessness of Normalization. As one reviewer remarked, 'the absence of a distinct central plot does not matter: one couldn't do much in the timelessness of the period anyway'.⁶¹ The comedy benignly evokes the somewhat precarious, yet excitingly libertarian existence of a number of characters based on recognizable dissidents, their lifestyle enabled by the oppressive structure of the regime. The fragmentary story meanders somewhat aimlessly through smoky apartments, where heroism stems more from the desire for attention of self-involved men rather than a genuine concern with the problems of society: dissent is portrayed as one big party where the sense of transgression is facilitated by the strictures the regime imposes.

The punk-rock nostalgia film *Don't Stop* (dir. Richard Řeřicha, 2012) takes the structure evident in *Zemský ráj to napohled* even further; it uses the notion of 'the regime' only as a placeholder for a set of rules to be rebelled against. The idea that the communist regime is something against which the characters must set themselves is assumed to be so self-evident that it becomes unclear in what ways it is *communist* authority that the characters protest. The story of the young protagonists, who start a punk band in 1980s Prague, might as well be set in London in the late 1970s – resistance against the regime becomes emptied out of any concrete political content and turns into a generational anti-establishment stance.

Don't Stop consolidates the observation made already in relation to Dousková's work at the beginning of this chapter that Czech nostalgia turns to socialism's form and not its content – the regime is used as a framework which enables the narrativization of Normalization through gestures of resistance. Šabach, as well as the films I have mentioned, highlight the value of the regime as an object against which characters define their identities and this sentiment is also echoed in non-fictional reappraisals of the period. For example, a petty heroic interpretation of the period was endorsed by the Czech literary establishment by awarding Petr Placák the *Magnesia Litera* prize for his autobiographical text *Fízl*

⁶¹ Vojtěch Rynda, 'Zemskému ráji vládnou ženy' [Earthly paradise is ruled by women], *Lidové noviny*, 19 November 2009, 8.

(The Cop) in 2008. In this text, Placák, son of a dissident and active participant in underground culture, reiterates many of the same sentiments Šabach expresses through his fictional characters. For instance, he reminisces: 'We could have opposed our parents, been insolent towards our teachers, but all that meant nothing in comparison with no matter how small a confrontation with a cop, which for us was the main goal of any conceivable heroism'.⁶² Referring to these possibilities of heroism, he concludes ironically, yet with a certain wistfulness, that 'in a dictatorship one did not need much to achieve happiness'.⁶³

Nostalgia in the Czech context thus finds an unlikely object, in that it turns to the oppressive aspects of the regime. As Pam Cook observes, 'nostalgia is predicated on a dialectic between longing for something idealised that has been lost, and an acknowledgement that this idealised something can never be retrieved in actuality, and can only be accessed through images'.⁶⁴ Nostalgia for resistance idealizes a certain aspect of the socialist past, here a kind of fictional community of anti-communists, to whom this mechanism thus ascribes moral value through representation. Politically, nostalgic representations participate in a wider discursive strategy which seeks to find specific perpetrators of 'the system' (here the communists, who are always 'the Other'), while generating an exculpating non-participatory image of socialism for 'ordinary' people, who in these portrayals did not contribute to sustaining the regime's power, but instead find themselves quietly resisting it.

4.3 Retro as a postmodern mode: *Rebelové* and *Vyprávěj*

In the previous chapter, I identified retro as a postmodern, ironic form of nostalgia devoid of an affective dimension. In its ironic stance, it loosely aligns with what Svetlana Boym has termed 'reflective nostalgia'.⁶⁵ The vocabularies associated with the nostalgia paradigm are, however, inadequate in capturing a postmodern relationship to the socialist past divorced from a concept of active remembering,

⁶² 'Mohli jsme se bouřit proti rodičům, být drzí na učitele, ale všechno to nic neznamenalo proti sebemenšímu střetu s fízlem, který byl pro nás metou jakéhokoli myslitelného "hrdinství"'. Petr Placák, *Fízl* (Prague: Torst, 2007), 13.

⁶³ 'V diktatuře stačilo opravdu málo ke štěstí'. Ibid, 14.

⁶⁴ Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 4.

⁶⁵ Boym, xviii.

and for this purpose a more detailed definition of retro is necessary, predicated on the kind of temporal narrative it imposes on the relationship between the past and the present. It is not just the mechanism of petty heroism that establishes a sense of superiority over the past, of having overcome a deficient period, but the aesthetic project of representations of socialism also partakes in a similar dynamic. Films such as the above-discussed *Občanský průkaz* are retro not only because they re-create the period they portray with an over-abundance of material objects and fashions, but because this attention to aesthetics belies a rejection of the politics of the past. This pattern, I will suggest, is by no means limited to the Czech Republic or indeed to the post-socialist space; such a reaffirmation of a sense of satisfaction with the present can also be found in contemporary English-language popular culture.

What I am here terming the retro mode intersects with French and Anglo-American discourses of the postmodern both on the level of textual strategies and as a means of periodization. As a stylistic repertoire, postmodernism saw interest from Czech authors from the 1990s onwards, including Michal Viewegh, or, for instance, Jáchym Topol and Miloš Urban. Peter Zusi has suggested that the postmodern as a designation for a particular historical moment arguably gained currency once again after 1989: 'the confluence of cultural and historical currents in the 1990s gave postmodernism fresh impetus, as well as caché, in post-socialist Europe right at the time when the term was losing its aura in Western Europe and the United States'.⁶⁶ Irena Reifová has been perhaps the only scholar to identify Czech post-socialist nostalgia and its rise in a period that saw a confluence of a number of "post" prefixes as a specific manifestation of this wider trend that Zusi describes. She observes that 'it was not only socialist doctrine that broke down at the end of the 1980s. Shockwaves caused by the collapse of "grand narratives" resonated across Western societies around the same time',⁶⁷ as part of ongoing processes that Jean-François Lyotard described already at the end of the 1970s in

⁶⁶ Peter Zusi, 'History's Loose Ends: Imagining the Velvet Revolution', in *The Inhabited Ruins of Central Europe: Re-Imagining Space, History, and Memory*, ed. Dariusz Gafijczuk and Derek Sayer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 227-245 (235).

⁶⁷ Reifová, 'Rerunning and "Re-Watching"', 66.

The Postmodern Condition.⁶⁸ Retro refuses to read socialism as grand narrative; the narratives it is able to tell are necessarily small and episodic.

Socialism is viewed through a double frame: on the one hand, these retrospective representations visually reconstruct the past; on the other hand, artefacts from the past – in particular, music – are brought into this reconstruction. The two complementary strategies – retrospective reconstruction and the re-visiting of period culture, can thus be viewed as two regimes of memory, which Susannah Radstone and Katherine Hodgkin define as ‘the kinds of knowledge and power that are carried, in specific times and places, by particular discourses of memory’.⁶⁹ Re-creating and re-visiting the period involves a mobilization of different kinds of knowledge: a negotiation of personal experience, whether first-hand or handed down in the case of the former; and a mediation of the past through the producers’ vision in juxtaposition with the viewers’ expectations in the case of the latter. As I will show, both of these strategies are ultimately harnessed to the same agenda of generating a sense of cultural continuity between the socialist and post-socialist periods, a narrative with a seemingly opposite temporal tendency than nostalgia, which requires a sense of break and rupture.

Building on Fredric Jameson’s discussion of postmodern nostalgia as devoid of affect,⁷⁰ retro is here understood as a pick-and-mix attitude towards the stylistic repertoires of the past, characterized primarily by its irreverent and ironic stance. This differentiates retro from more traditional understandings of nostalgia as an emotion in relation to the past. In its lack of emotional charge, retro aligns with what Paul Grainge terms a ‘mode’ rather than a ‘mood’.⁷¹ Together with Jameson, Elizabeth Guffey has argued that retro pillages the past at random.⁷² In her monograph on retro furnishings, Sarah Elsie Baker takes issue with this stance, noting that ‘theoretically Guffey does little but rehearse old debates and reiterate their conclusions: that retro style is evidence of the draining of meaning

⁶⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), first published in 1979 as *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*.

⁶⁹ Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin: ‘Regimes of Memory: An Introduction’, in *Memory Cultures: Memory, Subjectivity and Recognition*, ed. Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 1-22 (2).

⁷⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), xvii.

⁷¹ Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Style in Retro America* (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2002), 21.

⁷² Elizabeth E. Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 163.

characteristic of late capitalism'.⁷³ Baker attempts to recuperate the critical potential of retro by arguing that rather than decontextualization, the valuation of certain objects as retro involves recontextualization and the production of new meanings.⁷⁴ However, an even wider point can be made here which prevents us from arriving at the unexciting conclusion that retro is the ultimate symptom of a postmodern malaise of meaninglessness. Rather than evidence of a free-for-all collapse of grand narratives, the draining of meaning can itself be understood as evidence of a new metanarrative of postmodernism, which might resist such a designation on the level of its content but nevertheless replicates it through its form as one of the dominant narratives of the contemporary era. If retro is indicative of a draining of meaning, this in itself rather signals a shift in the horizon against which meaning can be interpreted.

On the representational level, the last chapter demonstrated that a retro mode is achieved through the use of postmodern narrative techniques and a camp sensibility. Retro can thus be understood as being both a mode inscribed in the text, as well as a reading strategy brought to a text. Through adopting an ironic stance, the reader, viewer, or consumer, endows a socialist artefact with retro value. Such an ironic stance can occur when the artefact has been placed in a new context – together with Baker, recontextualization is also the basis of Ina Marešová's definition of the shift from *Ostalgie* to retro, to my knowledge the only scholarly attempt in the Czech context to posit such a distinction: 'retro only becomes retro at the moment of imitation, i.e. at the moment when a given feature is deliberately reproduced in a different context, either in its original form or with added meanings. Such a reproduction then loses its original emotional potential tied to nostalgic memory and becomes a phenomenon realized mainly for purely aesthetic reasons'.⁷⁵ However, unlike Marešová I suggest that the move towards seeing the past as 'purely aesthetic' in itself constitutes a political move. I follow Jameson who argues that 'the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be

⁷³ Sarah Elsie Baker, *Retro Style: Class, Gender and Design in the Home* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 15.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷⁵ Ina Marešová, 'Mezi etikou a estetikou: Ostalgie jako typ kolektivní paměti', in *Populární kultura v českém prostoru*, eds. Ondřej Daniel, Tomáš Kavka, Jakub Machek et al. (Prague: Karolinum, 2013), 60-67 (63).

seen as an ideological act in its own right’;⁷⁶ consigning nostalgia or retro to a purely aesthetic realm thus adopts an untenable meta-ideological position. Even artefacts which ostensibly recycle only the stylistic aspects of the socialist period by doing so generate narratives in relation to the past which are implicated in the politics of the present.

Building on Raphael Samuel’s notion that retro aesthetics updates past styles to contemporary tastes,⁷⁷ retro works with a sense of continuity between the past it returns to and the present moment from which this past is narrated. This reiterates Kevin Platt’s position on Soviet retro, which ‘describes the revival or continuation of traditions that appear never to have been lost, rather than the quixotic overcoming of the deleterious effects of time and the total disjuncture of collapse associated with post-socialist nostalgia’.⁷⁸ Unlike the break of nostalgia then, retro works with a narrative of continuity where the past is available for pastiche. Such a narrative is made possible by the position of privilege from which it is recounted. As Boris Buden effectively summarizes in relation to the narrative projected by Prague’s Museum of Communism – but the observation applies equally well to literary and visual representations of the period – ‘this story had a happy end, the final victory of capitalism, and it is from the perspective of this lucky outcome that it is retrospectively told’.⁷⁹

In what follows, I draw examples primarily from the musical comedy *Rebelové* (The Rebels, dir. Filip Renč, 2001) and the television series *Vyprávěj* (Tell Me a Story, dir. Biser Arichtev, 2009-2013), which was produced in five seasons by Dramedy Productions for Czech Television, to illustrate how the type of engagement with the past these representations display, rather than being understood through the established framework of post-socialist nostalgia, is more fruitfully designated ‘retro’ in the sense I have just described.⁸⁰ These two texts

⁷⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 79.

⁷⁷ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 83.

⁷⁸ Kevin M. F. Platt, ‘Russian Empire of Pop: Post-Socialist Nostalgia and Soviet Retro at the “New Wave” Competition’, *The Russian Review* 72, no. 3 (2013): 447–469 (464).

⁷⁹ Boris Buden, ‘In den Schuhen des Kommunismus: Zur Kritik des Postkommunistischen Diskurses’, in *Zurück aus der Zukunft: Osteuropäische Kulturen im Zeitalter des Postkommunismus*, ed. Boris Groys, Anne von der Heiden, and Peter Weibel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005), 339–363 (349).

⁸⁰ Both the film and TV series were seen by large audiences: about 400 000 in cinemas for *Rebelové* (source: Lumiere database) and an average rating of 1 327 000 viewers for the first season of

lend themselves to comparison because they share a number of themes in terms of their content, as well as a host of stylistic devices. Both turn to the 1960s and the period of the Warsaw Pact invasion, which they present in a heavily visually stylized manner. *Rebelové* is a musical comedy which constructs its narrative around a pre-existing canon of 1960s songs, detailing the love stories that develop between three teenage girls and three young men who have deserted from military service. *Vyprávěj*, on the other hand, is a soap opera which follows the stories of three generations of an 'average'⁸¹ family from 1964 onwards. *Rebelové* and *Vyprávěj* capitalize on what is presented as 'quality' period entertainment for the purposes of their own validation. Retro thus builds its efficacy on the seemingly contradictory tendency of on the one hand resurrecting quality entertainment from the past and at the same time adopting a condescending attitude to other features of the period, in particular its material culture and politics.

Apart from a few specific moments, *Rebelové* and *Vyprávěj* do not engage in a sentimental mobilization of memory, in the way that some other representations of socialism have. The evocation of sentiment becomes less of a factor in these texts, which represent periods that their creators did not necessarily experience at all, or only as children. This kind of generational exchange, in which the past is consumed through a pastiche of styles, lends itself to a retro reception. Retro is thus not a characteristic of representations or practices, but a sensibility in relation to the past akin to Raymond Williams's structure of feeling. Williams posits that a structure of feeling is a set of dominant perceptions and values in a particular generation, which manifest chiefly in the cultural production of a period.⁸² In this sense, retro as a structure of feeling can be viewed both as a particular response to the socialist past shared across members of a generation that came of age at the very end of socialism or only after its demise, but also as an aesthetic inscribed in representations of the past produced by this generation. The concept of structure of feeling provides a loose enough framework to be able to speak about a recognizable general sensibility – one not imbued with any

Vyprávěj (26 episodes, 2009-2010; source: ATO – Nielsen Admosphere, courtesy of the Czech Television Archive).

⁸¹ The producer of the series, Filip Bobiš, summarized the setting of the series in the broad 'grey zone' of mainstream society in the following way: 'They [the characters] are not involved communists, nor do they fight against the regime, instead they live their everyday lives in such ways as were possible at the time'. Irena Hejlová, 'Vyprávěj: Chystaný rodinný seriál České televize cílí na pamětníky,' *Hospodářské noviny*, 2 July 2009, 10.

⁸² See Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1965), 63-65.

particularly strong sentiment towards the past in this case – available to a generation as well as those observing the generation from the outside, without suggesting that such an attitude must necessarily be universal in all members of that generation.⁸³ Retro thus appeals not only to those for whom the objects, fashions, and music in these representations act as memory triggers; its lack of experiential investment in the period allows for precisely the kind of distance that facilitates irony and thus enables an appreciation of the playful and at times irreverent appropriation of the past in the film and TV series under discussion. The socialist past is figured through an overabundance of period markers, which represent the past, but do not aim to recreate it accurately.



Figure 11. *Rebelové* (The Rebels). Filip Renč (director, screenwriter) and Zdeněk Zelenka (screenwriter), 2001.

Termed a “song-filled retro-film” [*písničkový retrofilm*], Renč’s garishly colourful musical (Fig. 11) partakes in a genre relatively uncommon in Czech film production. As Jan Čulík has observed, the main purpose of *Rebelové* is to ‘create an entertaining framework’ for a range of well-known 1960s pop songs. The narrative is constructed in such a way as to justify and accommodate this pre-existing canon

⁸³ The concept of structure of feeling has been employed in a similar fashion by Ekaterina Kalinina in her discussion of post-Soviet nostalgia. Given the lack of nostalgia in the Czech context, I find the concept more applicable to the narrower designation of “retro” as a subset of post-socialist nostalgia. See Ekaterina Kalinina, *Mediated Post-Soviet Nostalgia* (Huddinge: Södertörn University, 2014).

of both original, as well as Czech versions of English-language songs around the story of three teenage girls and three young men who have deserted from military service in the summer of 1968. Thus the film relies on a somewhat heavy-handed use of the 'cue for a song' device, where something that occurs in the film's diegesis justifies the inclusion of a number that otherwise does not relate to the plot or characterization in any way. Referencing not only the music itself, *Rebelové* also refers to the 1960s Czechoslovak musical as a genre, and to the songs' original transmission in the form of television songs [*televizní písničky*], the Czechoslovak precursor to the music video. The film is thus over-saturated with references to the popular culture of the 1960s. In particular, the numbers in the first half of the film follow a recurring format. A song will begin as a performance in the narrative presence of the film: for example, 'Pátá' (lit. Five O'clock, a cover version of Petula Clark's 1964 hit 'Downtown') starts as a song sung as the school day ends, the students then bursting into a choreographed dance outside the school building. At a certain point, the action is transported into a studio space, which attempts to recreate the setting of the television songs with angular cardboard backgrounds and floating objects, only, unlike its black-and-white predecessors, in full contrasting colours.

Significantly though, not all of the numbers in the film feature period recordings: certain tracks were re-recorded by the film's actors, while the rest were used in their original versions as performed by artists such as Josef Zíma, Waldemar Matuška, and Olympic. This mixing of original product and reconstruction is typical also of the visual strategy of both the film and the TV series. The camp visuals of the film make use of the aesthetic of retrochic, which, as Raphael Samuel argues, references historical styles but remains contemporary.⁸⁴ Like *Šakalí léta*, *Rebelové* updates the colour palette of the 1960s to give costumes a present-day appeal. The visualisation of the past in *Vyprávěj* is also less concerned with historical accuracy than it is with packaging the series in a visually attractive retro-look. The full-hued costumes, chic hairstyles and bright make-up the characters wear are primarily designed to appeal to a contemporary audience. Hence the costumes often employ not only period polyester and other synthetic fibres, but also present-day, evidently higher-quality materials. Costume shapes

⁸⁴ Samuel, 83.

and cuts also introduce a twenty-first century aspect. Figure 12 presents the main heroine of *Vyprávěj*, Eva, in a retro print, but attractively modern tight-fitting stretchy T-shirt, while the other character, here representing a social worker, is coded as negative through the dowdy, and from today's point of view, unfashionable grey suit she wears. In an interview, the costume designer of the series, Libuše Pražáková, emphasized that this was a deliberate strategy in the visual packaging of *Vyprávěj*: 'in spite of my memories, I went in for more colours. The producers also asked me to try to achieve a close successive relation between the clothing and today's fashions, so that young spectators would recognize themselves in it, just as in the music'.⁸⁵ The visual style of the series and the film thus updates past looks for contemporary tastes.



Figure 12. *Vyprávěj* (Tell Me a Story). Biser Arichtev (director) and Rudolf Merkner (screenwriter), Dramedy Productions/Czech Televison, 2009-2013.

The serial form of *Vyprávěj*, with its long-run format of twenty-seven fifty-minute episodes in the first season, necessarily incorporates a wider range of techniques for evoking the past than *Rebelové*, but also heavily relies on a pastiche of period markers. The series is structured around the interplay of large historical and small personal events, represented by four generations of the Dvořák family. In order to give their stories historical grounding, each episode is framed by two segments of archival footage, at times with a newly-recorded voiceover commentary. This footage anchors each episode in contemporary political events,

⁸⁵ Sylvie Absolonová et al., 'Zpátky do studentkých let' *Top Seriál Vyprávěj 1* (2009), 61.

but often also reminds viewers of period music, theatre, or film (the archival footage in Episode 7, for instance, features clips from the production of Theatre Semafor with popular comedians Miroslav Šimek and Jiří Grossman). Kamil Činátl observes the importance of media within the fictional world of the series: passing shots of television screens in the characters' apartments frequently offer a glimpse of popular stars of the day, and scenes are often accompanied by period hits playing intradiegetically on the radio.⁸⁶ The incorporation of historical pop-culture examples into the daily lives of the fictional protagonists serves to raise the credibility of the narrative of their everyday experiences. Visually stylized to a lesser degree than *Rebelové*, *Vyprávěj* nevertheless features a plethora of period markers. The retro aesthetic of the series is manifest in this eclectic evocation of the past, where material and popular culture, and informal practices, are displayed with a kind of frenzy: a single episode may draw attention to obtaining under-the-counter goods, dwell with narratively redundant shots on design details such as the shape of beer bottles, or display posters of Western pop stars. The level of stylization is evident already from the opening credits of the series, which (literally) frame the past with whimsical period objects (Fig. 13).



Figure 13. *Vyprávěj* (Tell Me a Story). Biser Arichtev (director) and Rudolf Merkner (screenwriter), Dramedy Productions/Czech Television, 2009-2013.

⁸⁶ Kamil Činátl, *Naše české minulosti, aneb, jak vzpomínáme* (Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2014), 157.

As noted, the musical aspects of *Rebelové*, which employ both old and new recordings, sit between periodization and contemporaneity like the visual style. These texts thus work on both the production design and musical level as a pastiche, which selects elements from certain precursors and models. By pastiche, I here mean, together with Richard Dyer, a recognizable form of imitation. As Dyer argues, 'for it to work, it needs to be "got" as a pastiche. In this sense, it is an aspect of irony. This implies particular competencies on the part of the audiences'.⁸⁷ This type of quoting from a past corpus of cultural production recontextualizes 1960s music as 'retro' through its ironic strategy. Recognizing references is a powerful tool for creating a multi-layered viewing community; that the period music used captured the attention of viewers is also shown on the discussion page of the series' website,⁸⁸ where one of the most frequent types of posts sees users asking for details of songs that were played in various episodes. The key here is the kind of eclecticism with which the past is appropriated. In this sense, it is no surprise that representations such as *Rebelové* and *Vyprávěj* occasionally reach to pop culture references that are anachronistic. Jan Čulík suggests that the focus on the personal stories of the characters in *Rebelové* depoliticizes the narrative of 1968, which forms the backdrop to the film, and in this way already anticipates the spirit of the 1970s and 1980s. Although Čulík's assessment of the period of so-called Normalization as apolitical can be challenged, his observation points to one of the central effects of the retro aesthetic, namely a blurring of chronology, where markers of the past are exploited without regard for periodization.

Nevertheless, the aesthetic project of *Rebelové* and *Vyprávěj* differs from more demonstrably postmodern attempts at dealing with socialism such as the afore-mentioned 2008 Russian film *Stilyagi*. Visually reminiscent of *Rebelové* with its loud colours (Fig. 14), Todorovskii's film is also a musical comedy, which returns to 1950s Moscow. However, the songs used are an indiscriminate pastiche, where the 1950s are musically figured in 'anything goes' style 'through a collage of musical numbers in which cult underground rock numbers from the eighties are

⁸⁷ Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 3.

⁸⁸ <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/10266819072-vypravej/diskuse/> [accessed 18 March 2014].

put to original lyrics pertaining to the plot'.⁸⁹ *Rebelové* and *Vyprávěj*, despite not always respecting chronology, are much stricter in their use of music that can be identified as from the period the film and series represent. Especially the first few episodes of *Vyprávěj*, which feature a sub-plot revolving around the main protagonist Karel's band, rehearse the same catalogue of 1960s songs that featured also in *Rebelové*, including the numbers 'Oliver Twist' and 'Hvězda na vrbě' (The Star on the Willow Tree). The inclusion of these particular songs suggests that they are not only part of a shared canon, but that they also assume the role of 'quality' products here. The fact that the soundtrack to *Rebelové* became the best-selling music album in the Czech Republic in 2001 indicates that the reintroduction and recontextualization of 1960s pop captured the imagination of a wide cross-generational audience.⁹⁰ A cursory survey of responses to the film online on such platforms as the Czechoslovak Film Database also indicates that the songs themselves and their restaging were privileged by users of these websites over the actual narrative of the film.⁹¹



Figure 14. Stilyagi (Hipsters). Valerii Todorovskii (director) and Iurii Korotkov (screenwriter), 2008. Publicity shot.

⁸⁹ Yana Meerzon, 'Dancing on the X-rays: On the Theatre of Memory, Counter-Memory, and Postmemory in the Post-1989 East-European Context', *Modern Drama* 54, no. 4 (2011): 479-510 (499).

⁹⁰ Vladimír Vlasák, 'Rebelové si přišli na své' [The Rebels have come into their own], *iDnes.cz*, 27 February 2002, http://kultura.idnes.cz/rebelove-si-prisli-na-sve-0hm-hudba.aspx?c=A020226_1938_22_hudba_ef [accessed 8 March 2014].

⁹¹ <http://www.csfd.cz/film/7632-rebelove/>. A typical commentary, posted by user Radyo on 24 June 2003 states 'Multicoloured kitsch, but great in terms of the music' [accessed 8 March 2014].

What I term the 'quality narrative' is a significant response to the popular culture of the socialist era – it could be witnessed strongly in responses to the rescreening of *Major Zeman*, where certain sections of the audience saw the series as a well-crafted genre piece. Čulík offers a variation on this view in relation to *Rebelové*. His book-length and highly subjective evaluation of Czech post-1989 film production tends to be generally dismissive of the qualities of most films, however he rates the music used in *Rebelové* highly: 'The popular songs that the film brings back to the viewers were often remarkable works of art whose genuinely poetic texts were profoundly metaphorical'.⁹² The press reception of *Rebelové* also focused on the quality of the music.⁹³ Both of these responses suggest that the culture of the 1960s, associated as it is with a period of increased artistic freedom of political and cultural liberalization leading up to the Prague Spring, holds a special place in this kind of 'quality narrative' in the Czech context.

The notion of continuity is also central to the implied political agenda of *Rebelové* and *Vyprávěj*. Both representations construct narratives which are primarily personal (love stories, family stories) and turn away from politics. The interactions of the teenage characters in *Rebelové* in the summer of 1968 – a moment in Czechoslovak history when everyday life was arguably more intensely politicized than at other times – are not in the least marked by political concerns. The purpose of this observation is not simply to point out an apparent historical inaccuracy in the portrayal of the period. *Rebelové* is full of small details that do not fit the historical picture of the 1960s – indeed, the central premise around which the plot is structured of three soldiers escaping to an imagined and dreamt-of West while a smear campaign is being conducted against them in the media appears slightly incongruous set in the summer of 1968, when the country had undergone extensive liberalization and legal travel to the West was no longer as highly restricted as in previous years. But it is less important to evaluate a film – especially one which through its genre makes little pretence at realism – against its historical backdrop than to examine what purposes such ahistoricity may serve. As Pedersen argues, the film performs a 'collapse of 1968 with the Normalization

⁹² Jan Čulík, *A Society in Distress: The Image of the Czech Republic in Contemporary Czech Feature Film* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2013), 95.

⁹³ See, for example, Darina Křivánková, 'Renč vystavěl pomník šedesátým létům' [Renč has built a monument to the sixties], *Lidové noviny*, 9 February 2001, no pagination; Jaroslav Sedláček, 'Rebelové', *Cinema 3* (2001), 50-53; Věra Míšková, 'S Rebely přichází smích, hudba i pláč,' [With the Rebels comes laughter, music and tears], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 8 February 2001, 13.

period'.⁹⁴ The different stages of Communist Party rule in Czechoslovakia are effectively levelled and non-differentiated, a move that is compounded by the pastiche attitude of the retro aesthetic. By their very elision of political narratives, representations such as *Rebelové* shape a particular political interpretation of the past, in this case a blurring of the distinctions between reform socialism and its subsequent suppression.

Vyprávěj illustrates this even more clearly. The Dvořák family, in particular the main hero Karel, his father, and staunchly anti-communist grandmother, who all prefer to stay out of active politics, present models for living through socialism in a comfortable, yet uncompromising manner. Karel's friend Tonda, on the other hand, who hovers on the edge of dissent, is not portrayed as favourably; in Season 3, Episode 20, the two friends fall out when Karel accuses Tonda of being an *androš*, a derogatory term for a member of the Underground. *Vyprávěj's* pedagogy is thus focused on the notion of the 'ordinary person', rather than the exception of dissent. There is no doubt as to what the correct ways of living through socialism were, demonstrated for us through the family of the Dvořáks. Karel consistently refuses to give petty bribes, a widespread practice, while his father Josef successfully manoeuvres out of being pressured to join the Communist Party by his boss. Often the subplot of an episode will dramatize precisely such a moral problem and its model resolution: for instance, Season 1, Episode 9, tackles a widely-perceived stereotype of state socialism, namely that pilfering from the workplace was a socially acceptable behaviour. However, Josef obviously disapproves of his colleague and friend Mirek as he takes home an extra pair of work overalls from the railway depot where they work.

Karel, Josef, and his mother Běta are portrayed as sharing an innate democratic sentiment, which structures their principles. Karel is a particularly pertinent example of this. Karel knows best: he is above politics, as the communists are not to be trusted, never were and never will be. While the idealist activist and later dissident Tonda ends up in prison for his political activity, Karel's obstinate ignorance of politics even at the height of the Prague Spring, similar to that of the protagonists of *Rebelové*, is portrayed as the most efficient strategy for survival in socialism. When Tonda asks him in the summer of 1968 on a canoeing

⁹⁴ Pedersen, 185.

holiday what he thinks about the political situation, Karel happily replies 'We're completely cut off from the world here, we don't know anything'.⁹⁵ He waits patiently until the fourth season of the series, where the changes of 1989 retrospectively validate his view and he finally sets up his own company in a new-found enterprising zeal. A seemingly apolitical entrepreneur-in-waiting, Karel embodies the Czech national myth which harks back to the democratic and market tradition of the First Republic, suppressed by communist oppression, now making its triumphant comeback. The series' selection and reuse of certain elements of socialist popular culture becomes a mechanism of incorporating the socialist period into this larger narrative of continuity, which enables the narrativization of everyday life under socialism, while suggesting that Czechs never endorsed communist ideology while existing within it.

With their protagonists who stay out of socialist politics, representations of socialism also build on a wider national narrative of continuity with the First Republic, perpetuating the myth of the Czechs as an inherently democratic nation.⁹⁶ In contrast to German *Ostalgie*, the nationalist agenda of Czech representations of socialism manifests in their implication of a foundational myth of Czech democracy in which socialism is viewed as a period of its suppression, a mechanism described by Slavoj Žižek in the following way:

'there is no national identity before its (colonialist, etc.) 'oppression'; national identity constitutes itself through resistance to this oppression – the fight for national revival is therefore a defence of something which comes to be only through being experienced as lost or endangered. The nationalist ideology endeavours to elude this vicious circle by constructing a myth of Origins – of an epoch preceding oppression and exploitation when the Nation was already there'.⁹⁷

Socialism is viewed as an externally imposed aberration in a democratic Czech identity, which is endangered during this period and only fully regained with 1989. Such a position is made possible by the retrospective teleology that these representations inscribe into their narratives; the reader and spectator view the

⁹⁵ 'Jsme tady úplně odříznutý od světa, nic nevíme'. *Vyprávěj*, 2009-2013, Season 1, Episode 6.

⁹⁶ This is also one of the myths in Kieran Williams' analysis of Czech nationalist mythopeia. Others include the myth of Slav reciprocity or the peculiar 'myth of mythlessness' which sees Czechs as too rational to sustain an extensive national mythology. See Kieran Williams, 'National Myths in the New Czech Liberalism', in *Myths and Nationhood*, ed. Geoffrey Hosking and George Schöpflin (London: Hurst, 1997), 132-140 (135).

⁹⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2002), 213-214.

past from a privileged position of knowledge of the result of overcoming the period through the Velvet Revolution.

Characters such as Karel, or the gracious father-entrepreneur of the main heroine in *Rebelové*, who runs the first privately-owned pub in the region – the filmmakers' apparent nod to their idea of 'liberalization' in the 1960s – are possible because the market values of capitalism are already retrospectively inscribed onto the moral compass of the characters during socialism, a move described by Mieke Bal as 'paranthocentrism', which 'assumes that one's own position is normal, the standard, beyond questioning, hence universal and transparent'.⁹⁸ The values that the characters endorse fall under a broad notion of 'freedom' for which they resist communist rule, and which is most clearly articulated in the idea of the freedom of the market. Such representations of socialism reaffirm an anti-communist politics where the present political order is seen as the culmination of a trajectory of Czech history which can turn back to exploit the aesthetics of socialism at will from a position of safety.

This kind of implicit political framework does not, however, contradict the aesthetic fetishization of the period on which retro representations build their popularity. As Činátl convincingly argues in his analysis of responses to *Vyprávěj*, despite the obvious inscription of value judgements into the narrative structure, the reception practices of actual viewers often tend to disregard these and focus rather on the authenticity of the material objects on display.⁹⁹ Indeed, the relationship towards the material culture of socialism, while fetishizing the quirky and the outdated, also participates in a generally superior attitude towards the past, which could be described as one of condescension. In the canon of Czech depictions of socialism, this mechanism is most memorably captured in *Pelíšky*, which generates humour from the laughable inadequacy of socialist-era products in two key scenes. The efforts of Šebek, an army man and convinced communist, to demonstrate the quality of socialist manufacturing fall flat: in the first instance, he embarrasses himself in front of his close family at Christmas, when 'unbreakable' glasses from Poland reveal themselves to be easily broken by his teenage son. In the second episode, Šebek's humiliation is even more complete when he gives

⁹⁸ Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 19.

⁹⁹ Činátl, *Naše české minulosti*, 154-176.

plastic spoons as a wedding gift to his neighbour Kraus, the staunchly anti-communist veteran of WWII resistance. 'These are spoons developed by researchers in the GDR',¹⁰⁰ Šebek says emphatically to Kraus, who admires anything of Western provenance. The scene's humorous resolution arrives when the plastic spoons melt in the hot coffee that the wedding guests are served. The comedy of this episode hinges on the one hand on the endearing deficiency of socialist-era products; on the other hand, the spectator is able to laugh at this precisely because in the present, they are better off: not only do they have access to quality material goods, but they also do not have to stand in long queues to procure them.

This mechanism of retro as a particular temporal dynamic of relating to the past is not limited to the post-socialist space. A moral hierarchy from which the present emerges as a moment of self-congratulation on the progress made since the times represented can be witnessed in a range of retro representations, for instance the iconic American television series *Mad Men* (Weiner Bros., 2007-2015). Although the relationship to the material culture of the 1960s United States, where the series is set, is one of abundance and luxury rather than the scarcity and inadequacy in portrayals of socialism, the political message of the show arguably shares some similarity with Czech retro. Set in a 1960s advertising agency in New York, the world of the series is one of extravagance, and the spectator too is treated to a vicarious enjoyment of fruits that are often considered forbidden in the present. These include not only the heavy drinking and smoking, but also a time when political correctness was not a concern, and sexist, homophobic, and racist remarks did not raise any eyebrows. The reason a contemporary American television series is able to depict such a world is because it operates with the assumption that the viewer will be able to distinguish the characters' behaviour precisely as racist, sexist, homophobic, or, for instance, environmentally insensitive. Mark Greif has termed this mechanism 'Now We Know Better':¹⁰¹ the series continuously reaffirms the superiority of the more enlightened politics of the present. Jerome de Groot suggests that this is typical of American popular culture: 'America is of course the pre-eminent country in the world for

¹⁰⁰ 'To jsou lžičky, které vyvinuli výzkumníci z NDR'. *Pelíšky*, 1999.

¹⁰¹ Mark Greif, 'You'll Love the Way It Makes You Feel', *London Review of Books* 30, no. 20 (2008): 15-16 (15).

representations of various particular pasts that work towards the focal point of now, a rejecting of the “old ways” for the compelling modernity of the self-in-nowness’.¹⁰² However, there is no reason to assume that this is a mode of representation specific to the United States; the Czech representations I have been discussing work analogously.

Similarly to *Mad Men*, the nostalgia of Czech retro texts lies not in the politics of the period, but in a narrative of its overcoming. The two regimes of memory I discussed – retrospective reconstruction and the re-visiting of period culture – co-exist here in a symbiotic relationship. On the one hand, the retrospective frame uses the popular culture of the period, in particular its music, as a means of historical authentication. On the other hand, this popular culture is itself validated by its incorporation into the retrospective frame with its anti-communist political message. In particular, the culture of the 1960s, with its associations of greater freedom and simultaneously lack of association with communist politics, is treated in this way. Its perceived quality makes this popular culture something worth turning back to and bringing into the present, which contributes to a narrative of continuity from socialism into post-socialism. Yet precisely because it builds a linear narrative of progress, retro can also choose to cast certain aspects of socialist culture – in particular its material world – into the realm of the overcome, while others, such as fashions, are updated for contemporary consumption. This is not a mechanism limited to the post-socialist setting. A cultural product such as *Mad Men* also does not require a historical discontinuity to look back at the past with an attitude of simultaneous fascination and smugness. In a pick-and-mix manner, the pastiche of the retrospective view selects what can be included into the narrative of continuity and what on the other hand is cast out. The knowledge of the present’s superiority gives retro a wide discursive scope that can survive its own ridicule: socialism can be figured through both deficiency and quality, as a time of suffering and a time to joke about, as an ‘Other’ to be rejected from national memory, or raided for its more redeemable features.

If retro is a postmodern narrative mode, then it may seem somewhat incongruous that I have argued for the linear narrative of continuity being a

¹⁰² Jerome De Groot, “Perpetually Dividing and Suturing the Past and Present”: *Mad Men* and the Illusions of History’, *Rethinking History* 15, no. 2 (2011): 269–85 (276).

powerful dimension of representing the past in the Czech context, as discussions of postmodernism have often focused on a sense of temporal levelling or depthlessness. However, as Zusi points out, the renewed interest in postmodernism in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 played into 'at least one major strand of postmodernism [which] involved the return to a historical sense as a corrective to the excesses of the high modernist or avant-gardist temporal paradigm'.¹⁰³ The narrative of continuity projects such a historical sense, and because it eschews a feeling of a definite historical break between socialism and post-socialism, it makes all culture of the socialist period equally accessible, equally available for pastiche.

4.4 The Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968 as grand narrative

Rebelové and Vyprávěj both portray the year 1968 and the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. The depiction of the invasion itself needs to be given more attention, as it mobilizes a different emotional repertoire to the affectless retro I have been describing. Echoing the shift in tone witnessed already in the portrayal of the invasion in *Pelíšky*, discussed in the last chapter, these representations discard a retro 'mode' and adopt a nostalgic 'mood' by indulging sentiments of solidarity, self-pity, and victimhood. In *Rebelové*, which concludes with the heroine's emigration in the wake of the invasion, the bright colours, slapstick comedy, and postmodern pastiche of 1960s songs, give way to a much more sombre narrative. In an emotionally charged scene, the heroine Tereza passes through the main square of her hometown in a car with her father and his partner, watching her fellow citizens trying to deliberate with Warsaw Pact soldiers sitting on tanks, accompanied by the plaintive tones of Judita Čeřovská's Czech-language cover of 'Where Have All the Flowers Gone?'. Passing by her classmate Olda, who has been desperately in love with her throughout the film, she calls out to him as the car drives by; Olda's face registers resignation and regret as Tereza's car recedes into the distance. In a gesture of farewell and loss, he throws a stack of leaflets he has been handing out into the air; the camera captures their fluttering down to the ground in slow motion (Fig. 15). The music and the slowed-down pace

¹⁰³ Zusi, 232.

in this scene create an elegiac tone, compounding several layers of loss through mourning the departure of a loved one, the departure from one's country, and the end of the hopes associated with the Prague Spring.



Figure 15. *Rebelové* (The Rebels). Filip Renč (director, screenwriter) and Zdeněk Zelenka (screenwriter), 2001.

Vyprávěj uses a similarly melodramatic storyline to capture the affective charge of the invasion. The heroine Eva and her young son Honzík are on their way to Slovakia by train. The train however gets held up – in a move of somewhat heavy-handed symbolism on the part of the script – near a village called Bezpráví (Lawlessness) by a convoy of Russian tanks. One of the passengers experiences a heart attack. Eva, in a courageous gesture, attempts to implore the sympathy of one of the soldiers by explaining that the man needs to be transported to hospital. The soldier deliberates but ultimately points his gun at the group of passengers who have gathered outside the train around the ill man, shouting at them in Russian to move back. The camera then pans slowly across the faces of the passengers, their expressions registering fear but also disappointment and a sense of collective solidarity. The scene thus attempts to create an affective community between the characters of the Czech and Slovak train passengers and the viewer, all united against the invading soldiers.

The ability of these scenes to generate affect is built on the moment of 1968 as a grand narrative: unlike the perceived timelessness of Normalization, here there is a story to tell. Writing about the revolutions of 1989, Tim Beasley-Murray proposes ‘a distinction between the low-key anecdote that illustrates the normal and the grand narrative or story of exceptional events and deeds’.¹⁰⁴ Such a distinction can apply to the events of 1968 as well: by narrating a moment of exception, these representations can break out of the small and the personal and overcome the narrative impossibility of the socialist every day. In other words, to tell a big story, these representations make use of big emotions: Eva’s appeal to the conscience of the Russian soldier, or a scene of Tereza’s teacher in *Rebelové* throwing a Czechoslovak flag over a tank, are no longer gestures of petty, but of genuine heroism. The marshalling of emotion in these scenes is a technique that serves to validate the historical understanding of the invasion as a moment of exception and national tragedy as opposed to the carefree and light-hearted portrayal of the everyday.

Such moments evoke history as trauma, rejecting the postmodern playfulness of retro and instead employ more linear narrative techniques to create a strong narrative of national memory, which as I pointed out in the second chapter is a term that in the Czech context has been advocated primarily as a designation for a memory of suffering by groups such as the Confederation of Political Prisoners. In these instances, the difference to the retro mode with which these representations otherwise work is one of genre. I have argued that in the Czech context, humour is an essential aspect of retro’s postmodern playfulness and that up to the late 2000s, the dominant genre of representing socialism had been comedy. Even *Vyprávěj*, although a soap opera, has its fair share of comic moments. Humour functions as a distancing mechanism, it is a convenient tool for generating a self-deprecating look at the past. This enables an apologetic attitude towards the moral compromises the period demanded. For instance, in *Vyprávěj*, the fact that Karel’s father Josef is coerced into attending a May Day parade despite his ideological opposition is turned into a humorous episode when his mother, to whom he lied about his attendance – saying instead he was going to visit his

¹⁰⁴ Tim Beasley-Murray, ‘Ruins and Representations of 1989: Exception, Normality, Revolution’, in *The Inhabited Ruins of Central Europe: Re-Imagining Space, History, and Memory*, ed. Dariusz Gafijczuk and Derek Sayer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 16-39 (32).

father's grave – spots him in television footage of the parade and then indignantly insists that she will no longer live with him. The result is an apologetic look at partaking in the performative aspects of socialist daily life. Josef elicits sympathy twice: by having to endure the parade and by incurring the anger of his mother (when she should be pitying him).

But humour is no longer necessary when there are no moral dilemmas involved – *Rebelové* and *Vyprávěj*, but also *Pelíšky*, where the Warsaw Pact invasion disrupts a family wedding, employ August 1968 as an unequivocal moment of trauma where the whole nation was united in collective resistance against the invading forces. Casting particular historical moments as trauma and depicting them dramatically rather than humorously marks a generic shift which evokes different political meanings. Whereas the retro mode saw heroism being carried out by ordinary characters in small and petty ways, in depictions of 1968, resistance is transferred from the individual to the collective. Moreover, it takes on a much clearer object than the vague representatives of the regime towards whom gestures of petty resistance turned. Here the nation is seen as united against Soviet imperialism.

Popular representations see the Warsaw Pact invasion as primarily a Russian undertaking and it is anti-Russian sentiment which they mobilize (in *Pelíšky* in the wake of the invasion, Kraus asks his daughter how to say 'bastards' in Russian, and goes on to shout the word from his balcony). A peculiar twist on this narrative is presented in *Anglické jahody* (English Strawberries, dir. Vladimír Drha, 2008), a hybrid genre film set entirely during the first days of the invasion in a small town outside of Prague, which sits somewhat uncomfortably between attempts at comedy and drama. Like its comic predecessors, *Anglické jahody* features gestures of petty heroism and a consequentially apolitical stance of its young protagonists, as opposed to the quashed political hopes of the committed communism of the older generation. Here, the generational revolt of the youngsters manifests in being indulgent, or indeed sympathetic, towards the invading soldiers as an act of resistance against the despair of their parents – a move that confused one reviewer who complained that 'what emerges most strongly from the film is a conciliatory tone which excuses all those poor occupiers (...) The relatives of the victims of the former gentle occupiers probably won't be

impressed'.¹⁰⁵ The film's insipid depiction of the invasion also did not meet with an audience response – it was seen by less than 12 000 spectators throughout 2008.¹⁰⁶

Another film which defied the generic conventions of depicting the invasion as trauma, and perhaps the only picture to engage with other national representatives of the Warsaw pact, is the whimsical Czech-Polish co-production *Operace Dunaj* (Operation Danube, dir. Jacek Glomb, 2009), which casts both the Czech patrons of a provincial pub and a bumbling crew of invading Polish soldiers as victims of the Soviets. *Operace Dunaj* was a box-office flop¹⁰⁷ and it appears that audiences did not endorse the move to completely subvert the traumatic qualities of what is widely perceived as the one unequivocal moment of national tragedy in post-war Czechoslovak history. The negative reception of the film was encapsulated by critic Mirka Spáčilová, who warned that the farcical rendering of the invasion 'may deeply offend witnesses of August 1968'¹⁰⁸ – echoing the reviews of *Anglické jahody*. The concern for the memory of eye-witnesses of this particular historical events points to the idea that a dramatic depiction can more 'authentically' capture the trauma of the past; a notion which historical dramas of the late 2000s and 2010s, discussed in the next chapter, exploit as well.

The moment of 1968 thus defies the two significant features of portraying state socialism in the second post-socialist decade in the Czech Republic, which it underscores and validates by way of contrast: the trope of petty heroism and the retro mode. Comic appraisals of socialism are predicated on a position of naturalized superiority, which provides readers and viewers with a vantage point that allows for appropriating as well as ridiculing certain aspects of the culture of the past. Such a position does not necessarily hinge on the idea of 1989 as a radical break which would generate a need to recuperate something lost. The studied

¹⁰⁵ Irena Hejdová, 'Anglické jahody: sovětská konzerva s něžnými okupanty' [Anglické jahody: A Soviet tin can with gentle occupiers], *Lidovky.cz*, 12 November 2008, <http://magazin.aktualne.cz/kultura/film/anglicke-jahody-sovetska-konzerva-s-neznymi-okupanty/r~i:article:621822/> [accessed 7 January 2015].

¹⁰⁶ http://lumiere.obs.coe.int/web/film_info/?id=30789 [accessed 7 January 2015].

¹⁰⁷ The film was seen by less than 27 000 spectators in cinemas in the Czech Republic, a meagre number considering the all-star cast of the film. <http://lumiere.obs.coe.int/web/search/> [accessed 15 November 2015].

¹⁰⁸ Mirka Spáčilová, 'Recenze: Polský tank nabořený v české hospodě zabil šanci Operace Dunaj' [Review: Polish tank rammed into Czech pub killed opportunity for Operace Dunaj], *iDnes.cz*, 23 July 2009, http://kultura.zpravy.idnes.cz/recenze-operace-dunaj-0tu-filmvideo.aspx?c=A090722_173728_filmvideo_ob [accessed 27 November 2015].

representations of socialism posit a linear conception of time, a continuity which progresses into the present. Retro relates to the past without sentimental affect, because this past is not lost, but in certain ways always has been and continues to be there.

The notion of continuity may seem at odds with the amnesia of anti-communism, the pervasive rejection of the past that attempts to write the forty years of communist rule out of Czechoslovak history. Yet as Boris Buden observes, 'the discursive space of post-communism does not in principle know any contradictions',¹⁰⁹ and as such is able to accommodate a number of paradoxes. The discourse of anti-communism is also possessed by the contradiction between on the one hand striving to annihilate the memory of socialism, while continuing to reify it by seeing its legacies and perpetrators everywhere. Thus it is possible to be nostalgic for specific aspects of the previous regime – in particular as a framework against which it was possible to protest and commit acts of minor heroism – while acknowledging and simultaneously condemning its authoritative nature. Indeed, retro finds a site for the reconciliation of nostalgia and the totalitarian interpretation of state socialism in the domestication of *totáč*, the colloquial term for totalitarianism in Czech. The cosy world of films like *Pelíšky* is hard to describe as totalitarian, but it can be subsumed under the diminutive of *totáč*, a comfortable vision of a past where the population is exculpated of responsibility, support, or complicity with the ruling power, because they were held in check by the 'Others' representing the regime. The motif of petty heroism is used as an expiating gesture, while the simultaneous failure of resistance in representations also acts as an implicit excuse for the longevity of the system, which is perpetuated by 'someone else', but not 'us', a category into which representations invite readers and viewers through their narrative structure.

Svetlana Boym writes that nostalgia is 'an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world'.¹¹⁰ The shift from nostalgia to retro provides such a continuity, not through affective yearning, but by doing away with affect. Insofar as there is any longing displayed, it is not for the past, but for 'a romance with one's own fantasy'.¹¹¹ Retro

¹⁰⁹ Buden, 350.

¹¹⁰ Boym, xiv.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

turns the past into a fantasy space by selecting what can be included into the pastiche of the narrative of continuity. It recounts the past from a paranthocentrist position in which the present is the natural outcome of the trajectory of the past – a position which, like other ‘centrisms’, as Bal outlines, suffers from biases that ‘undermine the possibility of understanding the other of the universal’.¹¹² Hence the motivations of the ‘Other’ – communists as the representatives of the regime – are not only not explored, they are virtually absent. The films and TV series discussed in this chapter, with their anti-communist patterns of identification likewise turn to a fantastical imagining of the past, where state socialism functions as a colourful and pleasant aesthetic veneer that allows characters to perform minor acts of heroism and moral exemplarism in a world where the object of their defiance has been relegated to the margins of both narrative and history.

¹¹² Bal, 19.

Chapter 5. Changing memory landscapes: from small stories to grand narratives

The Parliament of the Czech Republic is aware of ‘the need to preserve the memory of the huge number of victims and of the losses and damage suffered by the Czech people and other peoples in the territory of the Czech Republic at the time of totalitarian dictatorships’¹, reads the preamble to Act 181/2007 Coll., which brought into being the *Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů* or *Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes* (ÚSTR). The year 2007, when the Institute was set up after much heated discussion in Parliament,² is a turning point in state efforts to gather, preserve, and guard the memory of oppression under the Nazi occupation and communist rule, which had previously been carried out by non-governmental organizations and civil society groups.³ These efforts brought to the fore an official memory politics that instituted an understanding of state socialism as a period of totalitarianism – as apparent already from the Institute’s name – and actively sought to promote the notion of heroic resistance.

The opening of ÚSTR and the accompanying controversies are the most visible marker in a changing memory landscape from the mid-2000s onwards. These institutional efforts at promoting particular memories are however part of a wider discursive shift that seeks to recount the socialist period in terms of large societal narratives. From about 2005 onwards, Czech public discourse on the pre-1989 past moved away from the small narratives of retro and comedy that dominated up to this date and were examined in previous chapters. Instead, representational and institutional culture evinces a new “search for heroes” in the mid-2000s. This search consists of attempts to present positive models for living in an oppressive regime, whether through active resistance or through strong moral positions. The trend aligns loosely with Boym’s understanding of restorative

¹ English translation of Act 181/2007 Coll., available at <http://www.ustrcr.cz/data/pdf/normy/act181-2007.pdf> [accessed 17 July 2015].

² The final debate on the Institute lasted five hours. See čtk, ‘Ústav paměti národa bude zkoumat i protektorát’ [Institute of the Memory of the Nation will also study the Protectorate], *Týden.cz*, 16 March 2007, http://www.tyden.cz/rubriky/domaci/ustav-pameti-naroda-bude-zkoumat-i-protektorat_6023.html [accessed 4 September 2015].

³ The Confederation of Political Prisoners, active from the early 1990s, has been discussed in chapter 2. Post Bellum, a not-for-profit organization active since 2001, has been engaged in ‘collecting memories’ of victims of oppression, particularly through the oral history project *Příběhy bezpráví* (Stories of Injustice) in cooperation with Czech Radio [*Český rozhlas*], the public radio broadcaster.

nostalgia, which, as I have shown, was not much in evidence in the Czech public sphere in the first fifteen or so years after the Velvet Revolution.

Boym suggests that restorative nostalgia strives to promote a 'national memory that is based on a single plot of national identity'.⁴ The search for heroes is also a search for a national identity articulated through resistance. Though nostalgia is not the most appropriate term here, there is a discernible shift towards a positive valuation of certain aspects of the socialist past. Where the comic retro mode condemned the regime while also looking back fondly at small, everyday occurrences, this new narrative de-emphasizes the everyday and looks positively at public acts. What are the political implications of such a shift? The answer is tied to a diversification of narratives about the socialist past and a challenge to the anti-communist consensus. Efforts at creating a national memory have generated strong counter-reactions, whether through the rise of revisionist historiography, a diversification of the press, or through new genres of representation.

This chapter continues the investigation of chapter 2 into discussions of the socialist past in the public sphere. After the initial phase of legislative reckoning with the past in the early 1990s, it was artists and activists who often promoted an anti-communist agenda. In the second half of the 2000s, this discourse moved once again to a more institutional level. Some of the artistic interventions already discussed in Chapter 2 continued into later years as well – for instance, the artistic collective *Podebal* renewed their 'Malík urvi' (Rip off the pinkie) project in 2010 in Prague's DOX Gallery,⁵ tackling once again the question of collaboration, though this time taking as their subject a more problematic and opaque topic: instead of displaying portraits of collaborators of the secret police, the exhibition showed portraits of judges and prosecutors who sat on political trials during the socialist period and who continued to be active in the judiciary after 1989. New anti-communist initiatives also appeared: in a widely discussed 2010 video titled 'Přemluv bábu' (Convince Granny)⁶ directed by acclaimed director Petr Zelenka and based on American comedian Sarah Silverman's piece 'The Great Schlep',⁷ two popular young actors appealed to voters to convince their grandparents to vote for

⁴ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xviii.

⁵ <http://www.dox.cz/cs/vystavy/pode-bal-malik-urvi-ii> [accessed 20 July 2015]

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTvWc5rNbmw> [accessed 4 September 2015]

⁷ In this sketch released during Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, Silverman appeals to young Jewish voters to convince their grandparents in Florida to vote Democrat. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgHHX9R4Qtk> [accessed 27 July 2015].

right-wing parties. Like previous examples of anti-communist rhetoric, the video performed the move of blaming all of the left wing, including the Social Democratic Party, for the forty years of communist rule. In Radovan Baroš's argument, the video is less an example of concrete right-wing politics, as it is of the discreditation of the very idea of sociability [*společensko*] and ethos of collectivism in the eyes of the younger generation.⁸

Such initiatives thus continued, but whereas previously anti-communism had been mainly concerned with a blanket condemnation of the past, this became less prominent as a discursive strategy as state institutions – and with them accompanying debates in the media – shifted their focus to questions of heroism and resistance. After first examining the new institutional discourses on the socialist past, this chapter then explores how representational culture responded and contributed to this changing memory landscape. In what can be termed a 'dramatic turn', literature, film, and television production increasingly tackled large historical moments and issues, such as the self-immolation of Jan Palach, the collectivization of the 1950s, the practices of the secret police, or the Velvet Revolution. This production saw a heightened aspiration to creating 'memory texts', a concept I adapt from Astrid Erll and Stephanie Wodianka's *Erinnerungsfilm* (memory film), which seek to shape the shared notions about the past.⁹ While film comedies about socialism continued to be made, after the large-scale production *Občanský průkaz* (The Identity Card, dir. Ondřej Trojan, 2010), comedy as the genre of choice for portraying socialism receded into the background. A few humorous depictions of Normalization did emerge even after this date, but have garnered less attention from both critics and audiences.¹⁰ Why this turn away from comedy and the small narratives of the everyday? What other themes have been taken up and in what ways is the relationship to the socialist past that these films present different from the retro discussed in previous chapters? What are they

⁸ Radovan Baroš, 'Doslav k českému vydání: Mizející horizont společnosti', in Boris Buden, *Konec postkomunismu: Od společnosti bez naděje k naději bez společnosti*, trans. Radovan Baroš (Prague: Rybka Publishers, 2013), 231-274 (264).

⁹ Astrid Erll and Stephanie Wodianka, 'Einleitung: Phänomenologie and Methodologie des "Erinnerungsfilms"', in *Film und kulturelle Erinnerung: Plurimediale Konstellationen*, ed. Astrid Erll and Stephanie Wodianka (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 1-20.

¹⁰ Among these rank the punk-rock comedy *Don't Stop* (dir. Richard Řeřicha, 2012), the Czech-Slovak coproduction *Konfident* (The Confidante, dir. Juraj Nvota, 2012), which portrays service in the Secret Police, or the television film *Osmý* (Eights, dir. Jiří Strach, 2014) about an accidental signing of Charter 77.

nostalgic for? And why have comedies not become ‘memory texts’? These are the questions that will be addressed in the second part of this chapter. Finally, the epilogue presents the television series *České století* (The Czech Century, dir. Robert Sedláček, 2013-2014) as a case study for the rise of what I see as a more pluralistic memory of socialism, in which representation acts as a productive site of contestation.

6.1 Battles for the past: from ÚSTR to Third Resistance

After the initial wave of transitional justice laws of the first half of the 1990s, the state became less active in legislating the way state socialism should be remembered. But in 2007, Parliament once again actively stepped in to shape the memory of the past by passing the Act that paved the way to opening the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (ÚSTR) the following year. The work of this Institute, which houses the Security Forces Archive for the period 1938-1989, concerns the study and public dissemination of knowledge about the repressive aspects of the Nazi occupation and the communist regime. An initiative of the right-of-centre coalition in power at the time, ÚSTR has arguably been associated primarily with two tendencies: identifying victims and oppressors of the communist secret police, and the glorification of the heroes of both WWII and anti-communist resistance. The latter has been the case particularly since 2011, when the law on so-called ‘Third Resistance’ came into being, which refers to resistance against the regime after 1948 as continuing the tradition of the so-called first and second resistance during the two World Wars. The Security Forces Archive works with the Ministry of Defence to verify applications for the official status of anti-communist resistance fighter. By institutionalizing a designation of the period as criminal, unjust, and illegal – apparent already in the institution’s very name – ÚSTR rehearses the narrative familiar from previous chapters of socialism as an aberration in an otherwise democratic Czech tradition and promotes a vision of a liberal democratic national identity not founded on any aspects of the socialist past.

These efforts at an official memory politics did not meet with unanimous approval in the public sphere. Hundreds of press articles have been published

every year on the subject of the Institute, which has its long-term supporters and opponents. The Czech analogue of the Polish Institute of National Remembrance or the Nation's Memory Institute in Slovakia was from the outset criticized by the left for being a political project of Mirek Topolánek's right-wing government in power at the time.¹¹ To an extent, the setting up of a "memory institute" was the brainchild of Pavel Žáček, formerly of the Office for the Documentation and Investigation of the Crimes of Communism, a state-sponsored precursor institution to ÚSTR, who became the Institute's first head. Žáček can be seen as one of the mnemonic warriors of the post-socialist era, advocating a coming to terms with the past in the form of identifying, exposing, and holding culpable specific perpetrators of political crimes before 1989. The title for this subchapter is borrowed from his publication *Boje o minulost* (Battles for the Past),¹² in which he outlines what he sees as inadequate institutional means of dealing with the legacy of state socialism in the 1990s. The metaphor of battles hints at how entrenched, polarized, and aggressive the debate on this past has become, while – ironically for Žáček's project – also being strongly reminiscent of stock phrases from the socialist ideological handbook. These battles for the past that took place around ÚSTR, however, were no longer only concerned with the ways in which reckoning with the past could be legislatively prescribed; rather the whole project of state intervention in memory processes was questioned.

The project proved explosive from the outset, as critics feared that control of the archives, which contain potentially compromising materials on various public figures, would be used for political purposes and institutionalize the anti-communist narrative as national memory. The archive thus emerged as a tool of both legitimating claims about the past and destabilizing them. As we will see, the idea of the archive, rather than personal memory, as providing access to the past, became a feature not only of institutional discourse, but also representational strategies in this period. The preamble to the Act that brought the Institute into being paraphrased George Santayana by stating that "Those who do not know their

¹¹ Left-wing MPs objected mainly to the Institute's council being appointed by parliament and feared that the Right would use this to ensure that their 'own people' would oversee the Institute. See Jan Kubita, "Triumf pravice: totalita se má zkoumat" [Triumph of the right: totalitarianism to be studied], *Hospodářské noviny*, 3 May 2007, 3; Tomáš Pavlíček, "Hledá se nový lovec komunistů" [Searching for a new hunter of communists], *Respekt*, 10 December 2007, 1.

¹² Pavel Žáček, *Boje o minulost* (Brno: Barrister & Principal, 2000).

past are doomed to repeat it',¹³ but the political skirmishes to which ÚSTR was subject would rather suggest that those who control the past in the form of the archive also control the present. The supreme body of the institution is a council elected by the Senate – and thus potentially subject to political pressures – which is also responsible for appointing the director. Between 2008 and 2014, the Institute changed directors five times, each one bringing in a new team. ÚSTR has thus consistently been plagued by high personnel turnover and charges of unprofessionalism, with only a minimal number of employees educated to PhD level.¹⁴ As a result of these constant shuffles, the institution was faced with challenges such as the resignation of the editorial board of the Institute's journal, *Paměť a dějiny* (Memory and History) in 2008,¹⁵ or the departure of the whole academic council in 2013.¹⁶

Furthermore, ÚSTR has had to deal with accusations of sensationalism and critique regarding several high-profile affairs, the most prominent being the accusation that novelist Milan Kundera had denounced a Western agent to the security services. As Christianne Brenner notes, the problems of this 'scandal' were so manifold – starting from 'the question of the credibility of the documents produced by the Secret Service to the general approach to historical sources and the question of how this story was first communicated to and later discussed in the Czech media',¹⁷ that they would require a whole enquiry of their own. Other criticized and later contested 'findings' of the Institute included claims that the Mašín brothers, members of an anti-communist resistance group, had planned to assassinate President Klement Gottwald, or that Václav Havel's close collaborator Joska Skalník had cooperated with the Secret Police.

Such incidents did nothing to enhance the reputation of the institution, which was already being cast into doubt because of its very remit by a coalition of

¹³ Act 181/2007 Coll.

¹⁴ In a 2010 interview, then director of ÚSTR Jiří Pernes stated that less than 10% of ÚSTR employees are in possession of a Master's degree or higher. See Milena Štráfěldová, 'Pernes: Z ÚSTR bych rád udělal ústav třicetiletých docentů' [Pernes: I'd like to turn ÚSTR into an institute of thirty-year-old associate professors], *Radio Praha*, broadcast 19 February 2010.

¹⁵ Patrik Eichler, 'Co s Ústavem?' [What to do with the Institute?], *Literární noviny* 19, no. 29 (2008), 1.

¹⁶ Jan Wimitzer, 'Vědci proti politikům. ÚSTR se drolí' [Scholars against politicians. ÚSTR is crumbling], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 16 March 2013, 1.

¹⁷ Christiane Brenner, 'Who were the villains? Czech narratives on the communist experience and the "normalization" period', paper delivered at the Memory between History and Contemporary Politics in East Central Europe workshop, Aarhus University, 30-31 January 2013.

forces, including a number of academic historians, public intellectuals and left-wing politicians. Vít Smetana of the Institute for Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences (Ústav pro soudobé dějiny Akademie věd ČR; ÚSD) warned before ÚSTR's opening that historians were 'worried about a massive entry of politics into the world of historical research'.¹⁸ Historians from ÚSD have been among ÚSTR's most sustained critics, not necessarily, as one commentator suggested early in the debate, because they feared having to directly compete with another institution,¹⁹ but because ÚSTR's form and mission raised serious questions about the kind of historical knowledge it could produce. Indeed, a number of historians not only from ÚSD, but also from Charles University and other institutions actively entered the debate, and frequently wrote in to various media outlets or were interviewed by them. ÚSD historian Michal Kopeček summarized the concerns of this group when he pointed out that the Institute has four main aims, some of which are inherently contradictory. First, it is home to the Security Services Archive; second, it promotes a particular memory of anti-communism, e.g. by helping to administer applications for official status as anti-communist resistance fighter; third, it aims to raise public awareness through educational activities; and finally, it is a research institute that studies the history of totalitarian regimes, or rather their repressive aspects. Some of these functions, Kopeček argues, complement one another, such as the archive and historical research, while others are necessarily at odds, e.g. academic research and the promotion of a particular historical memory and with it also national identity.²⁰

The Institute's mission produced two main responses. The position of the Institute's supporters can be summarized by the arguments of Stanislav Balík, a political scientist from Masaryk University in Brno, who saw ÚSTR as indispensable to maintaining a 'grand narrative of communism as the greatest civilizational disaster of (not only) the Central European region'.²¹ Balík feared that this important narrative was being challenged by calls for studying everyday history, which in his opinion dangerously mask the true nature of the regime. 'The

¹⁸ Vít Smetana, 'Vznikne orwellovský ústav?' [Will there be an Orwellian institute?], *Právo*, 20 March 2007, 6.

¹⁹ Petr Zídek, 'Druhá bitva o ústav' [Second battle for the institute], *Lidové noviny*, 3 November 2007, 4.

²⁰ Michal Kopeček, 'ÚSTR lépe a vědecky. Ale jak?' [A better and more scholarly ÚSTR. But how?], *Lidové noviny*, 8 April 2013, 13.

²¹ Stanislav Balík, 'Kulturní válka o povahu komunismu', [Cultural war over the nature of communism], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 12 April 2014, 11.

perverse foundation of the regime is not lessened by understanding how sport or filmmaking were organized',²² he argued and noted that the repressive forces are precisely what ÚSTR should focus on. However, no one in the debate was calling for ÚSTR to become an institute for the study of everyday socialism. Even those historians whom Balík criticized were well aware of the potential of ÚSTR's sources: Michal Kopeček has repeatedly asked why the Institute has yet to produce a history of the StB.²³ The clash about the scientific remit of the Institute thus rests not on what ÚSTR should study – the archive of the security forces – but rather what questions should be posed about its materials and in what manner they should be approached. Critics cited the misappropriation of the archive at the hands of scholars with a pre-ordained agenda as the chief problem, rather than the Institute's research agenda itself. The opposition between studying repression and everyday life emerged as a falsely mutually exclusive dichotomy used to relegate its respective adherents to opposing political camps in the debate, while the more pressing matter – that in order to understand the resources of the archive, it is clearly necessary to study them in conjunction with a wide source base and rigorous source criticism – was side-lined.²⁴

Amongst the most sustained critics of the Institute has been former dissident Petr Uhl, who worried that ÚSTR's focus on 'agent-hunting' in the archives would only bring about new and unfair accusations and re-instate a communist 'cadre-logic' in reverse.²⁵ Historian and *Lidové noviny* commentator Petr Zídek, an early supporter of the Institute, eventually became one of its harshest critics due to what he perceived as unprofessional work made on 'political demand', such as the poorly substantiated claims regarding the Mašín

²² Ibid.

²³ Michal Kopeček and Matěj Spurný, 'Dějiny a paměť komunismu v Česku' [History and memory of communism in Czech Republic], *Lidové noviny*, 9 January 2010, 24; Michal Kopeček, 'ÚSTR lépe a vědecky. Ale jak?' [A better and more scholarly ÚSTR. But how?], *Lidové noviny*, 8 April 2013, 13.

²⁴ As Muriel Blaive noted in an interview, repression and the everyday cannot effectively be separated: 'I really wonder how you want to study repression without studying everyday life, because how can you study how people dealt with repression without seeing how they dealt with it in their everyday life? That's where the notion of everyday life is seriously misunderstood in the Czech context and abused for political purposes'. Veronika Pehe, 'Blaive: When historical sources contradict political intent', *Political Critique*, 1 June 2015, <http://politicalcritique.org/opinion/2015/blaiive-archives-secret-police/> [accessed 3 September 2015]

²⁵ See, for instance, Petr Uhl, 'Žáčkův ústav ovládá nejen minulost' [Žáček's institute controls not only the past], *Právo*, 2 August 2008, 6; Petr Uhl, 'Jen výměna ředitele ústavu nepomůže' [A change of directors only will not help the institute], *Právo*, 6 January 2010, 6; Petr Uhl, 'Etická komise lépe zamlží minulost' [An ethics committee will obscure the past better], *Právo*, 20 December 2011, 6.

brothers' assassination plot.²⁶ In summary, those who objected to ÚSTR were concerned that the archives would be used not to produce in-depth historical knowledge about the period, but instead to exploit these sources for political gains and to build an official narrative of a national identity founded on images of patriotic anti-communist resistance.

Supporters of the Institute, however, did not see the latter as problematic; while a number of historians were naturally anxious about the quality of research that the Institute could produce, its defenders, particularly those close to the first director Pavel Žáček, were happy to concede that memorial aspects should precede ÚSTR's scholarly function. For instance, Monika Pajerová, who had been one of the student leaders during the Velvet Revolution together with Žáček, suggested that 'the people who had humiliated us for forty years should not be allowed to steal also our past from us'.²⁷ Thus the basic clash that developed in the Czech public sphere around the Institute was between those who thought that the history of repression should fall under a special, more public regime than other areas of historical research – public in the sense of awareness raising, but at the same time closed to certain members of society, such as 'those who had humiliated us' – and those who did not think that the history of the repressive aspects of the regime should be privileged in this way.

Some saw the first problem already in the Institute's name: the word 'totalitarian', they argued, not only falsely equates the Nazi occupation with communist rule as totalitarian regimes, but is also misleading as a descriptive term for the liberalization of the 1960s and late socialism in general.²⁸ Social Democratic MP Zdeněk Jičínský, one of the architects of the Prague Spring, even put a proposal to the Constitutional Court to abolish the Institute based on this objection.²⁹ While Jičínský did not succeed, his initiative started a wider debate in the press on the nature of totalitarianism, which revealed that despite the use of the term in official memory politics, as well as its colloquial everyday usage in the diminutive form

²⁶ Petr Zídek, 'Milý Pavle Žáčku!' [Dear Pavel Žáček!], *Lidové noviny*, 12 March 2008, 4.

²⁷ Monika MacDonagh-Pajerová, 'Je normální chtít normalizovat českou historii?' [Is it normal to want to normalize Czech history?], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 13 March 2010, 40.

²⁸ In particular Zdeněk Jičínský, one of the significant actors of the Prague Spring, refused to label the reformist period of the 1960s as totalitarian. Some former dissidents, such as Petr Pithart, also shared this view. See Václav Drchal, 'Češi pochybují o roce 1968' [Czechs have doubts about 1968], *Lidové noviny*, 18 August 2008, 1.

²⁹ Drv, 'ČSSD chválí komunistický režim před rokem 1989' [ČSSD praise communist régime before 1989], *Lidové noviny*, 28 December 2007, 1.

'totáč',³⁰ there is by no means a consensus around its appropriateness. The appearance of the term in the Institute's name, however, also exposed a methodological problem. By prescribing in its very name something that could only arise from its research – i.e. the question of whether or not the communist regime was totalitarian – ÚSTR was set up, as one commentator put it, 'as a tautology, as an examination of the totalitarian regime being totalitarian'.³¹ From the outset then, the Institute's ability to consider a plurality of interpretive frameworks was put into question.

Despite ÚSTR's effort to promote a particular narrative about the past, this narrative was not accepted as authoritative. Michal Uhl, as of 2013 a member of ÚSTR's council, summarized this effectively in an interview: 'The value consensus about the criminal nature of the previous regime has disintegrated. If the consensus still existed, Czech society would not be debating about ÚSTR'.³² If in the first and second decade after the Velvet Revolution, an anti-communist rejection of the past was the hegemonic narrative in the Czech public sphere, how did this discourse become destabilized? One important aspect was the aforementioned more visible public engagement of academic historians. Alternative focuses of historical research to that of ÚSTR were often the subject of discussion and at times controversy. An example was the much debated book *Konec experimentu* (The End of the Experiment) by Michal Pullmann, published in 2011. The monograph, which in its concern with the consensual aspects of late socialism focuses on precisely the opposite of what ÚSTR aims to study, prompted a number of negative, even aggressive reactions.³³ Yet many commentators also came out in defence of Pullmann, and the number of articles published in relation to his book suggests that alternatives to the totalitarian paradigm were being taken seriously

³⁰ Jan Pauer, 'Totalitarismus jako teorie a jako český "totáč"', *Soudobé dějiny* 14, no 4. (2009): 699-708.

³¹ Martin Hekrdla, 'ÚSTR v době ústrků' [ÚSTR in a time of machinations], *Týden*, 2 April 2013, 61.

³² Marek Švehla, 'Ke slovu musí přijít levicovní historici' [Left-wing historians must be heard], *Respekt*, 14 April 2013, 38-43.

³³ The debate was kicked off by Jan Rejžek's polemical piece, in which he took issue with Pullmann's claim that the present political order evinces much continuity with the Normalization era and accused him of harbouring sympathies for the period because his father was a high-ranking Communist Party official. Responses both in defence of Pullmann and in support of Rejžek were numerous. See Jan Rejžek, 'Ještě o normalizaci' [Once more on normalization], *Lidové noviny*, 9 June 2011, 12; Josef Chuchma, 'Jak to vlastně tenkrát za normalizace bylo' [What actually happened back then during normalization], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 11 June 2011, 39; Vítězslav Sommer, 'Nehněvej se zrcadlo' [Do not be cross, mirror], *Lidové noviny*, 16 June 2011, 11; Jan Dobeš, 'Polemika, nebo kádrový posudek?' [A polemic or a cadre appraisal?], *Lidové noviny*, 17 June 2011, 11; etc.

not only amongst a specialized academic readership, but also in the wider public sphere.

Another aspect that led to a gradual discursive shift in the public sphere was the emergence of new press platforms outside of the traditional centre-right dailies and weeklies. With the rise of the internet, blogging platforms attached to the online news sites of the major dailies have given voice to opinions across the political spectrum. Since 2005, the initially weekly and later biweekly critical magazine *AZ*, and later its online daily platform *AZlarm*, and since 2009 the online daily *Deník Referendum* (Referendum Daily), have diversified the political range present in Czech media and voiced criticism of the dominant anti-communist discourse. This contestation even led commentator Zuzana Kaiserová to announce the end of Czech anti-communism in an essay in *Mladá fronta* in 2013, arguing that ‘anti-communism as a guideline seems to have exhausted itself and this year’s elections show that it has been replaced by a different narrative: the much more utopian idea of fighting against corruption’.³⁴ Whether or not Kaiserová’s assessment of anti-corruption discourse taking over the role previously held by anti-communism in Czech society is correct, it is clear that a wholesale condemnation of the past had become less salient.

In such a changing mediascape, it is perhaps not surprising that positions have become more polarized. An example of this is the ‘fortification’ of the memory of resistance, which was promoted through several interconnected institutions and organizations that came together in a complex web of state-sanctioned and grassroots culture of memorialization, which takes as its aim to introduce notions of heroism into public discourse. At the outset of this development stood the voluntary organization Post Bellum, founded in 2001, which records oral histories with war veterans, victims of injustice during the socialist period, and those who actively opposed the previous regime. Started as a project of several journalists, who intended to document the fates of war veterans after the Second World War (hence the Latin name *Post Bellum* – Post-War),³⁵ the organization has since grown into a large NGO with a number of significant media and institutional partners who have promoted its projects. Since 2006, journalists from Post Bellum have been

³⁴ Zuzana Kaiserová, ‘Konec českého antikomunismu?’ [The end of Czech anti-communism?], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 28 December 2013, 5.

³⁵ Jiří Kubík, ‘Muž, který založil banku vzpomínek’ [The man who founded a bank of memories - interview with Mikuláš Kroupa], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 16 November 2013, 13.

regularly broadcasting a programme called *Příběhy dvacátého století* (Stories of the twentieth century) on Czech public radio. The organization's other main project is the building of an online oral history archive called *Paměť národa* (Memory of the Nation), but their activities also include organizing exhibitions, the publication of graphic novels, a phone application, and since 2010, the awarding of the Prize of the Memory of the Nation.³⁶ Post Bellum can be seen as actively promoting a heroic discourse, which they believe is missing in the Czech public sphere – one of their very first projects, for instance, was called 'Hlasy hrdinů' (Voices of Heroes).³⁷

The organization's founder, Mikuláš Kroupa, admitted that although initially he had an idea of 'total heroism', he quickly discovered when gathering testimonies that he had to give up this ideal, noting that for instance the behaviour of those who were active in the resistance movement during the Second World War was less exemplary after the communist takeover.³⁸ The straightforward search for heroes was thus complicated by the complex historical circumstances that narrators often found themselves in. The project tries to take this into account to an extent by also interviewing those who had themselves committed injustice, such as StB agents or other representatives of the repressive apparatus.³⁹

While Kroupa is cautious about passing any political judgements on his activities, the stance of another memorial project called *Příběhy bezpráví* (Stories of Injustice) organized by the largest Czech NGO People in Need, is unequivocal. This initiative of the organization's educational department brings film projections and debates with eye witnesses to schools since 2005. The language and pedagogical aims of Stories of Injustice are clearly highly prescriptive, even more so than that of the educational department of ÚSTR, with whom the Stories of Injustice project occasionally collaborates. The project's coordinator Karel Strachota views his efforts to bring to the centre of attention the crimes of the communist regime as a corrective to Czech society attempting to 'force them out of

³⁶ For an overview of the organization's activities, see <http://www.postbellum.cz/> [accessed 4 September 2015].

³⁷ Eva Břeňová, 'Veteráni jsou unikátním zdrojem informací' [Veterans are a unique source of information], *Deník Litoměřicka*, 5 March 2004, 20.

³⁸ Miloš Kozumplík, 'Mikuláš Kroupa - HRDINOVÉ NEJSOU' [Mikuláš Kroupa – THERE ARE NO HEROES], *Instinkt*, 6 November 2008, 68.

³⁹ Hana Hikelová, 'Vytvoření obrazového a zvukového archivu svědectví pamětníků 20. století' [Creating a visual and sound archive of testimonies of witnesses of the twentieth century], *Český rozhlas - Radiožurnál*, broadcast 14 September 2006.

collective memory'.⁴⁰ As one article put it, 'the most willing to remember are those who were happy in the given period. The memory of the nation is receding'.⁴¹ The central assumption in such pronouncements is that 'national memory' consists of trauma and positive memories do not qualify to become part of the national canon.

The memory of socialism as trauma was compounded by the much criticized publication *Mýty o socialistických časech* (Myths about Socialist Times), a book designed by the team of *Príběhy bezpráví* as a supplement to secondary school textbooks and widely available in stores, which brought a distinctly one-sided interpretation of the period of Normalization to the classroom. In the introduction, the authors clearly state that their goal is not to offer a plurality of perspectives that students can critically approach; rather, their aim is to demonstrate that 'people did not live better lives, that there was nothing at all good about Husák's socialism, and what good did happen, only happened in spite of the regime'.⁴² The authors fear that the collective memory of socialism has been formed on the basis of 'nostalgically uncritical popular film production',⁴³ which they set themselves against.

Such efforts brought criticism not only from parents, who felt that the material did not correspond with their own memories, but also from critics, in particular Petr Zídek of *Lidové noviny*. Zídek was taken aback by the rejection of all aspects of Normalization and criticized the fact that many of the 'myths' the authors chose to dismantle were not in fact myths at all, if we understand these as commonly held beliefs. No one, as Zídek points out, believed that the air was cleaner before 1989 – rather, the authors manufacture 'beliefs' shared by the 'older generation', from which the younger generation of schoolchildren needs to be 'protected'.⁴⁴ As another commentator summarized, the book suggests that 'the truth is black and white, discussion is not welcome and doubts are suspicious'.⁴⁵ Educational initiatives such as *Stories of Injustice* thus attempt to shape a

⁴⁰ Karel Strachota, 'Výslech' [Interrogation], *Lidové noviny*, 9 Septmebr 2007, 11.

⁴¹ Lenka Martinková, 'Novodobá historie děti zajímá' [Children are interested in contemporary history], *Lidové noviny*, 6 December 2011, 19.

⁴² Adam Drda, Josef Mlejnek, and Stanislav Škoda, *Mýty o socialistických časech* (Prague: Člověk v tísni, 2010), 5.

⁴³ Karel Strachota, 'Nebylo naší ambicí vydat odbornou práci' [It was not our ambition to publish a scholarly work], *Lidové noviny*, 11 November 2010, 11.

⁴⁴ Petr Zídek, 'Divné mýty o socialismu' [Strange myths about socialism], *Lidové noviny*, 6 November 2010, 23.

⁴⁵ Ondřej Mrázek, 'Dvanáct polopravd o nedávné historii' [Twelve half-truths about recent history], *Literární noviny* 21, no. 48 (2010), 7.

collective memory that presents the forty years of communist rule as a kind of vacuum from which no positive legacy can be gleaned.⁴⁶

Zídek represents something of a dissenting voice within *Lidové noviny*, which was otherwise responsible for giving the above-mentioned memory initiatives a major public platform. Since 2005, *Lidové noviny* has periodically published a series of articles every November to commemorate the 1989 Velvet Revolution. The series, entitled *Stories of Injustice*, like the People in Need project, is a collaboration between this organization and journalists from Post Bellum. A major daily has thus given over a relatively large amount of space to non-governmental initiatives and their interpretation of the past. This promotion of the memory of victims, resistance, and heroes then set the discourse of memorialization high on the public agenda. In addition, Naděžda Kavalírová, long-time chairperson of the Confederation of Political Prisoners, has from her position of member of ÚSTR's Council since the Institute's opening repeatedly brought the topic of anti-communist resistance into the media. The culture of memorialization was granted an official seal of approval in 2011, when the centre-right dominated Parliament under Petr Nečas's government passed the Act on Third Resistance.

The Act defines an anti-communist resistance fighter as anyone who carried out armed struggle against the communist regime, as well as anyone who contributed to destabilizing or overthrowing this regime through written and editorial work, including work abroad. Certificates of membership in the resistance are granted by the Ministry of Defence after an assessment of relevant documentation by ÚSTR and the Security Forces Archive and are associated with a 100 000 CZK⁴⁷ reward and certain pension benefits.⁴⁸ The status of resistance fighter is not available to those who were members of the Communist Party, the People's Militia, or other Party organs. The law thus updates and grants practical impact to an earlier resolution from 1993, which stated that opposition to the

⁴⁶ Jan Jiříčka, 'Máma a táta se narodili za Husáka. Dějepisáři korigují krásné vzpomínky' [Mom and dad were born under Husák. History teachers correct nice memories], *iDnes.cz*, 31 August 2012, http://zpravy.idnes.cz/dejepisari-se-uci-pracovat-se-vzpominkami-rodin-zaku-p00-/domaci.aspx?c=A120827_103615_domaci_jj [accessed 31 July 2015].

⁴⁷ This is approximately 3.6 times the value of the average monthly salary in the Czech Republic as of the end of 2014, according to the Czech Statistical Office. <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/ari/average-wages-4-quarter-2014-e8cjo3wzcz> [accessed 30 July 2015].

⁴⁸ Luděk Navara, and Jan Gazdík, 'Byli jste hrdinové. První odbojáři to uslyší už (až) dnes' [You were heroes. The first resistance fighters will hear it already (only) today], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 10 April 2012, 4.

communist regime was 'legitimate, just, morally justified, and is worthy of respect'.⁴⁹ The Act clearly prescribes a vision of heroism founded on action and represents a shift in emphasis from the previous accent on victimhood embodied by the totalitarian interpretation of ÚSTR. But as Brenner points out, victimhood and heroism are in fact not at odds in this narrative: 'tales of extraordinary acts of resistance against the regime don't challenge the overall picture but actually fit in very well. After all, the tragic outcomes of many of those acts seem to confirm that nothing could have been done against communism without risking life or at least freedom'.⁵⁰

The problem with the Act on Third Resistance is that there is no public consensus as to whether there even was such a thing as legitimate armed resistance against the communist authorities, let alone whether it should somehow be officially commended. The most divisive case is that of the resistance group of the Mašín brothers, who in their subversive activities and eventual armed flight from the country in the early 1950s killed several people, mainly police officers, but, more controversially, at least one civilian.⁵¹ Reactions in the press, opinion polls, and television debates have repeatedly shown that public opinion of whether the Mašín's activities are to be lauded or condemned remains highly divided.⁵² Commentator Zbyněk Petráček suggested in 2010, on the occasion of the death of the Mašín brothers' close collaborator Milan Paumer, that 'it is certain that in recent years, the relationship towards ambiguous heroes has begun to change'.⁵³ As evidence, he cited former PM Mirek Topolánek, who had declared the Mašín brothers heroes in 2007, giving them a private award in 2008, and the Defence Minister who awarded the Mašín's sister in 2009. The cabinet interrupted its

⁴⁹ Available on the website of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic: <http://www.psp.cz/sqw/sbirka.sqw?cz=198&r=1993> [accessed 30 July 2015].

⁵⁰ Brenner, 'Who were the villains?'

⁵¹ Jan Wirnitzer, 'Roky bratří Mašínů: děti odboje, střelci na útěku, elitní vojáci USA' [Years of the Mašín brothers: children of resistance, shooters on the run, elite US soldiers], *iDnes.cz*, 24 August 2011, http://zpravy.idnes.cz/roky-bratri-masinu-deti-odboje-strelci-na-uteku-elitni-vojaci-usa-pyq-/domaci.aspx?c=A110824_114921_domaci_jw [accessed 18 November 2015].

⁵² According to a 2008 poll, 49% considered the Mašín brothers to be murderers, while the remaining 51% consider them heroes. Jana Machálková, 'Zemřel Milan Paumer - ten třetí' [Milan Paumer has died - the third one], *Hospodářské noviny*, 23 July 2010, 5. See further, for example, luk, 'Kavalírová: ať ČSSD ocení třetí odboj' [Kavalírová: ČSSD should commend third resistance], *Právo*, 29 January 2010, 4; Zbyněk Petráček, 'Kdo ocení Paumera?' [Who will award Paumer?], *Lidové noviny*, 24 July 2010, 10; Nad'a Adamičková and Marie Königová, 'Třetí odboj: Mašínové rozdělili sněmovnu' [Third resistance: the Mašín brothers have divided the parliament], *Právo*, 11 June 2011, 4.

⁵³ Zbyněk Petráček, 'Kdo ocení Paumera?' [Who will award Paumer?], *Lidové noviny*, 27 July 2010, 10.

meeting in honour of Paumer during his funeral and PM Petr Nečas stated that 'we have the right to fight enslavement with all necessary means'.⁵⁴ Paumer's death directly accelerated efforts to codify the Third Resistance in law, which resulted in the 2011 Act.

The coming together of several state and non-governmental institutions to generate a national memory from the second half of the 2000s increasingly represented an effort to hold together a discourse that was falling apart. The lack of consensus around ÚSTR and around the issue of Third Resistance point to a discursive shift in the Czech public sphere, where anti-communism is no longer as convenient a tool of demonstrating allegiance to the new elites as it was in the 1990s. The term 'coming to terms with the past' has come to signify almost exclusively the memory of repression and heroism in the Czech context. On the one side are thus those associated with official memory politics who through naming perpetrators and lauding heroes wish to purge collective memory of collective responsibility for the forty years of communist rule, while those who criticized such efforts are somewhat more willing to debate the contradictions, compromises, and moral failures of the period, and to broach the topic of consensus and complicity with the regime. The latter narrative, however, is not politically useful: as one *Deník Referendum* commentator put it, 'Czech capitalism requires the memory of "totalitarianism" today more than it did in the 1990s'.⁵⁵ The totalitarian interpretation presented by the various memory institutions discussed above provides a convenient grand historical narrative in its ability to easily condemn certain groups and cast the population as 'winners' of the transformation. The condemnation of the past thus serves to stifle critique of the present, continuing to perform a similar function that anti-communism held in the 1990s. Yet the increasing disagreement with this view also shows that the issue of the socialist past in the Czech public sphere has become more polarized. In a climate of rising contestation, official memory politics is used more strongly as a legitimating mechanism for the path that Czech society took after 1989. How this has happened on the discursive level in reaction to several interventions into the

⁵⁴ Luděk Navara, 'Pohřeb Paumera mění pohled na odboj' [Paumer's funeral changes view of resistance], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 5 August 2010, 1.

⁵⁵ Vít Štrobach, 'Paměť české transformace, aneb o přísluhovačích, vítězích a obětech' [The memory of the Czech transformation, or on lackeys, winners and victims], *Deník Referendum*, 3 February 2012, <http://denikreferendum.cz/clanek/12461-pamet-ceske-transformace-aneb-o-prisluhovacich-vitezich-a-obetech> [accessed 31 July 2015].

memory landscape has been the topic of public debate; what has been less discussed is how in the same period, the cultural memory of socialism has been slowly restructured by changes in representational strategies. The next section will address these developments.

6.2 The dramatic turn: the literary and cinematic search for heroes

Alongside the change in the public discourse on the socialist past, representational culture saw a shift away from retro and comedy and towards drama as the genre of choice. This shift was not abrupt, nor can it be interpreted as a direct reaction to the developments in the public sphere. Rather, both representations of the past and public debates began to explore new topics in relation to socialism in the second half of the 2000s in ways that ran parallel to one another, and at times intersected explicitly. The preoccupations of this representational culture gathered around three core themes that echoed the debates around ÚSTR and Third Resistance.

Firstly, historical documents gained a new importance in narratives about socialism in this period. In parallel to discussions of the appropriateness of the StB archives as a means of shedding light on historical events, ‘the archive’ emerged as a motif and metaphor in fictional accounts. Arguably this move signals an increased sense of distance from the past – it is only through letters and files rather than their own memories that audiences can now, with the increasing time-gap since the demise of the previous regime, access the past. The shift of the late 2000s suggests that memory is less reliable; while the small stories of retro-comedy narratives were able to recount personal tales without additional means of authentication, the new turn requires various historical ‘proofs’ to talk about the past. The archive plays a double role here of on the one hand being precisely such a mechanism of verification – as Maria Todorova notes, ‘archives continue to occupy an almost sacred place in the public imagination (as the repositories of truth)’⁵⁶ – but at the same time it functions as a device that indicates the complexity and confusion about this past in both representation and public discourse.

⁵⁶ Maria Todorova, ‘Introduction: The Process of Remembering Communism’, in *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation*, ed. Maria Todorova (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2010), 9-34 (23).

Second, related to the archival move in its concern with evidence is the discourse of authenticity that representations of the past generated via both textual and contextual means. The reliance on archival documents can itself be a means of authenticating fictional narratives. Invoking extra-textual realities (the most obvious being the 'based on a true story' rubric) is thus an additional mechanism of constructing 'authentic' depictions of history to the 'reality effect'⁵⁷ that representations in the realistic tradition manufacture through their literary or cinematic language. Whereas comedies with a strong retro-pastiche aesthetic such as *Rebelové* (The Rebels, dir. Filip Renč, 2001) made little pretence of realism, the more reserved visual style of the dramatic wave of films and series became another means of authenticating historical narratives and manufacturing a recognizable verisimilitude of the period.

The third element completing the new-found concerns of representational culture is the aforementioned search for heroes and grand narratives witnessed in public debates. Stories about the socialist past no longer find their locus in the 'cosy dens' of everyday occurrences where gestures of petty heroism or *stiob* act as a convenient outlet for expressing dissatisfaction with a vaguely defined 'Other' in the form of representatives of the regime. Instead, alongside the Act on Third Resistance, which attempted to stamp an official label of heroism on those who had previously been largely seen as victims, representations increasingly portrayed large-scale historical events, moments of trauma, and heroic actions which broke out of the small-scale resistance of the everyday. Not all the narratives that will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter took up all three of these elements; the thematic and generic repertoire of this literary and cinematic production is quite varied, but its uniting feature is what I am terming a 'dramatic turn' away from comedy.

In the second half of the 2000s, literary efforts at depicting the socialist period often played out in a genre that could be described as 'intimate tragedy' – the focus, as with comedies, remained on the private and on the family, but these spheres were encroached upon by traumatic historical events. The turn away from

⁵⁷ Roland Barthes identifies 'superfluous' detail, or 'notations' as a guarantor of the 'reality effect' in fiction, together with the rise of the photographic and its quality of 'having-been-there'. See Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', in Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 141-148; and Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', in *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 32-51.

comedy – a genre that had previously allowed for the nostalgic appraisal of some aspects of the past, particularly those that arose in opposition to the ruling power – is even more apparent in cinema. In particular, I am here concerned with the films *Pouta* (Walking Too Fast, dir. Radim Špaček, 2009), *Kawasakiho růže* (Kawasaki's Rose, dir. Jan Hřebejk, 2009), *Ve stínu* (In the Shadow, dir. David Ondříček, 2012), the HBO mini-series *Hořící keř* (Burning Bush, dir. Agnieszka Holland, 2013), and *Fair Play* (dir. Andrea Sedláčková, 2014). These films can be seen as a reaction to the dominant representational mode of socialism as retro-comedy.⁵⁸ A number of strategies contribute to this demarcation: the different generic repertoires they invoke (drama, thriller, neo-noir, courtroom drama), their evocation of fear as a dominant mood, but also their desire to depict Czechoslovak history as grand narrative with a large social trajectory.

Comic portrayals of socialism have consistently been more the domain of film than literature in the Czech Republic. The three significant representatives of this trend in literary production – Michal Viewegh, Irena Dousková, and Petr Šabach – were discussed in chapters 3 and 4. Their output, thanks to popular film and stage adaptations, has contributed to structuring the shared notions on the socialist past. More recent literary works have undoubtedly had less of an impact on the discourse about the recent past than some of the films I will discuss; cinema, through financial backing and marketing strategies, partakes in 'plurimedially constructed processes of negotiation', which Astrid Erll and Stephanie Wodianka argue are necessary for film products to act as 'memory films'; i.e. films that become part of and co-create the collective imagination of the past.⁵⁹ As Čeněk Pýcha explains, 'it is not possible to make a memory film, a film can only become one through its impact on the social context'.⁶⁰ Yet while the literature of the 'dramatic turn' may have had less of an effect on public debates and shared notions of the past than large-scale film productions, it is still worth discussing here at least cursorily, as much of it gained institutional validation through receiving various literary prizes and can effectively demonstrate the mechanisms that grant these narratives a dramatic resonance. This body of literature furthermore

⁵⁸ See Radim Hladík, 'Vážné, nevážené a znevážené vzpomínání v postsocialistické kinematografii', in *Film a dějiny 4: Normalizace*, ed. Petr Kopal (Prague: Casablanca and ÚSTR, 2014), 461-475.

⁵⁹ Erll and Wodianka, 2.

⁶⁰ Čeněk Pýcha, 'Kawasakiho swazek. Archivní materiál a vzpomínání na socialismus v současném českém filmu', in *Film a dějiny 4: Normalizace*, ed. Petr Kopal (Prague: Casablanca and ÚSTR, 2014), 556-573 (562).

illustrates that cinema is not isolated in addressing a number of new themes in the late 2000s, and constitutes a forerunner to the emergence of the archive as the key means of accessing, while also often obscuring the past. The new-found concern of literary production thus resonated with the ways in which information emerging from ÚSTR's archives revealed, but at the same time further tangled the histories surrounding particular individuals such as the Mašín brothers or Milan Kundera.

The corpus of texts – largely novels and novellas – that are set in or otherwise deal with the socialist period has grown quite large. I will not map here all literary works that touch upon this theme, but will discuss several texts that were published at roughly the same time as the new trend in memorialization took off and gained some recognition through receiving a range of literary prizes.⁶¹ An early example of this wave is Jiří Hájíček's 2005 novel *Selský baroko* (Rustic Baroque), which inaugurated what could be termed an 'archival trend' in depictions of aspects of the socialist past. In this text, set in the present, archivist and genealogist Pavel Straňanský returns to the traumatic history of the 1950s and the forced collectivization of Czechoslovak agriculture. He is commissioned to find a denunciation written by one-time village beauty Rozálie Zandlová, which had been used as a pretext by local authorities to create a case against several successful farmers, who were subsequently labelled 'kulaks' and forced to leave their village. *Selský baroko* is a novel of the unspoken – Hájíček resorts to a framing narrative in which we follow the silent and meditative Straňanský as he uncovers snippets of the past to form a jigsaw puzzle that can never be fully reconstructed. The text builds a contrast around Straňanský's trustworthy laptop, which holds his own archive of collected data, and faulty human memory which cannot or does not want to remember how events had really unfolded. In the end, the opening up of the past does not lead to greater understanding or redemption: the letter that Straňanský searches for is used to discredit a political opponent by a local politician. The only use of the past is instrumental.

Similarly to *Selský baroko*, the archive or the letter – textual traces of the past – emerge in Tomáš Zmeškal's *Milostný dopis klínovým písmem* (A Love Letter

⁶¹ Among these prose works are Jiří Hájíček, *Selský baroko* (2005, Magnesia Litera prize 2006); Věra Nosková, *Bereme, co je* (2005, nominated for Magnesia Litera prize); Věra Nosková, *Obsazeno* (2007, nominated for Josef Škvorecký prize); Petra Soukupová, *K moři* (2007; Jiří Orten prize 2008); Tomáš Zmeškal *Milostný dopis klínovým písmem* (2008, Josef Škvorecký prize 2009); Jan Balabán, *Zeptej se táty* (2010, Magnesia Litera prize 2010); Kateřina Tučková, *Žitkovské bohyně* (2012, Josef Škvorecký prize 2012), Jiří Hájíček, *Rybí krev* (2012; Magnesia Litera prize 2013).

in Cuneiform, 2008), Jan Balabán's *Zptej se táty* (Ask Dad, 2010), and Kateřina Tučková's *Žitkovské bohyně* (*The Goddesses of Žitková*, 2012) to disrupt or change the lives of the characters in the present. In these novels, the past is no longer an object of amusing memories of childhood or adolescence, the main structuring mechanism of comic and nostalgic portrayals of the past. The subject position of the protagonists and the reader is that of an adult, and moreover an adult who is willing to reflect critically upon the past. While the child's perspective allowed authors to adopt a deliberately naïve view of political events and focus instead on private joys and 'small' histories, here the firmly adult, mature perspective is prepared to face trauma. Even Věra Nosková's *Bereme, co je* (We take what comes, 2005), though a straightforward memoir that eschews a double time-frame of past and present, recounts its heroine's childhood years from a perspective that ascribes to the child an adult distance and political awareness: 'now I'm ten, I know many things about life and falsehood',⁶² she notes in a precocious way reminiscent of Kvido in Michal Viewegh's *Báječná léta pod psa*. But where the latter child protagonist was unaware of the political realities that affected his parents' lives, Pavla can read the situation from the outset, and already in the opening of the novel passes judgement on her grandfather, who is 'a so-called honest communist or rather communist-idiot'.⁶³

Practically all of these works either implicitly or explicitly value the present perspective from which they are written as superior to the past they deal with: in *Žitkovské bohyně*, ethnographer Dora is grateful that she no longer has to accommodate her work to the empty political demands and meaningless materialist phrases that the pre-1989 period asked for; in Jiří Hájíček's *Rybí krev* (Fish Blood, 2012), the characters place high hopes in the new democratic political representation to address environmental concerns in their area. Yet the judgement passed on the socialist period is not unequivocal. The motivations of characters are complex, and clear heroes or role models appear only seldom. For instance, Josef, the hero of Zmeškal's *Milostný dopis klínovým písmem*, does not fit into any of the established vocabularies that circulated in public debates at this time; he is a former political prisoner, but unwilling to think of himself as a victim or hero: 'He,

⁶² 'Teď je mi deset, o životě a falši leccos vím'. Věra Nosková, *Bereme, co je* (Prague: Abonent ND, 2005), 60.

⁶³ '...takzvaný poctivý komunista neboli komunista blbec'. Ibid, 10.

a victim? That didn't go together with him or his profession. He always thought of himself as someone who had had something resembling an accident, an unpleasant political accident, which had had permanent consequences, but it never occurred to him that he was a victim'.⁶⁴ However, it is always much clearer who the villains are. Both *Milostný dopis* and *Žitkovské bohyně* demonize the figure of the StB officer, a trope that comes up frequently also in film production. In *Bereme, co je*, the heroine's hated parents are at fault for being Communist Party members. Official representatives of power are thus clearly condemned, but positive examples are harder to come by. The period is depicted as producing some form of character flaw in most protagonists.

The complication of the idea of the hero via the archive is taken up explicitly by Hřebejk's 2009 film *Kawasakiho růže*. Like in several literary examples, central events from the socialist past in *Kawasakiho růže* are framed by a present-day narrative. The film picks up on topics which closely relate to the themes central to the debates around ÚSTR and Third Resistance: the psychiatrist and former dissident Pavel Josek is meant to receive a 'Memory of the Nation Prize' in an oddly prescient move on the part of the filmmakers, as the organization Post Bellum only began to award eponymous prizes a year after the film's release, in 2010. The central plot revolves around the appearance of an StB file which documents that prior to his dissident activities, Josek had informed on his future wife's boyfriend in order to rid himself of his rival. The archive thus emerges, as in *Žitkovské bohyně* or *Selský baroko*, as an intervention of the past that affects protagonists in the present.

The main topic of the film clearly resonated with contemporary 'agent scandals' – revelations about Milan Kundera and Joska Skalník's possible involvement with the secret police had circulated in the press only shortly before the film's premiere and became part of the journalistic discourse around the picture.⁶⁵ *Kawasakiho růže* directly thematizes and explores memory – the film does not contain any flashbacks, the past emerges only as text or words. The main character is a psychiatrist specializing in human memory and the film's exploration

⁶⁴ 'On, a oběť? To nešlo dohromady ani s ním, ani s jeho profesí. Vždy o sobě smýšlel jako o člověku, který měl takřka nehodu, nepříjemnou politickou nehodu, po které byly trvalé následky, ale že by byl oběť, to ho nikdy nenapadlo'. Tomáš Zmeškal, *Milostný dopis klínovým písmem* (Prague: Torst, 2008), 173.

⁶⁵ Vojtěch Rynda, 'Lidé se "škrálopem" s tím musejí ven' [People with a "blot" on their reputation must come out], *Lidové noviny*, 30 December 2009, 7.

of the ways in which the past affects present lives is thus tackled explicitly. Who can be considered a hero and what counts as failure is problematized; but what remains clear, like in some of the literary production discussed above, is the identity of the villain. The StB officer who stepped into the lives of the young Josek and his rival, forcing the latter to emigrate, is portrayed as a demonic, sadistic man who maintains a cool, professional detachment from his past activities.

The character is representative of a larger development of the figure of the secret policeman in Czech cinema. Jaroslav Pinkas sees this as part of a discursive shift whereby protagonists are repositioned as subjects who participate in creating their own circumstances⁶⁶ as opposed to the largely passive characters of comedies, whose political agency is limited to a few fleeting private gestures. While in *Kolja*, as discussed in chapter 3, the officers who interrogate Louka, the main protagonist, are mainly pitiable and at times comic characters whom Louka more or less manages to outwit, in *Pouta*, the anti-hero Antonín Rusnák is cruel and despicable. In *Kawasakiho růže*, *Hořící keř*, and *Fair Play*, the figures of StB officers, while not as sadistic as Rusnák, are far from the bumbling characters in *Kolja*. They are depicted as calculating professionals with a highly developed sense of order.⁶⁷

The dramatic wave shifts the enemy 'within' – representatives of the repressive apparatus are no longer comic peripheral figures like the policemen in *Občanský průkaz*, they have names and personalities. Evil is concretely embodied in specific characters. This marks a difference to comedies in which the 'regime' was often someone else, an absent Other hovering in the background, where representatives of power were quite often an object of laughter, while 'evil' remained vague and depersonalized. The supposedly solid evidence of the archive allows for a much stronger mapping of ethical categories onto characters, who are more clearly identified as perpetrators and victims, though not even written documents can necessarily provide moral clarity about the past. *Kawasakiho růže* uses the archive as a mechanism of simultaneously authenticating the past and questioning its veracity, in a similar way to the public debates which cited the

⁶⁶ Jaroslav Pinkas, 'Nenápadný půvab normalizace – její sociální realita optikou tehdejší a dnešní filmové kamery', in *Film a dějiny 4: Normalizace*, ed. Petr Kopal (Prague: Casablanca and ÚSTR, 2014), 476-490 (479).

⁶⁷ Jaroslav Pinkas, 'Hořící mramor: pomník Janu Palachovi', in *Film a dějiny 4: Normalizace*, ed. Petr Kopal (Prague: Casablanca and ÚSTR, 2014), 574-581 (576). Note that the uniform depiction of the StB officer in these films was compounded by the fact that Igor Bareš essentially reprised his role of an unpleasant secret police man from *Hořící keř* in *Fair Play*.

Security Services Archive as both a tool of shedding light on the past and misusing it. Is Josek ultimately a villain or someone who deserves our sympathy for displaying weakness at one point? *Kawasakiho růže* does not guide the viewer towards a clear answer. Similarly, scandals such as the one around Milan Kundera showed how difficult it is to establish any kind of 'verified' narrative about the past. The paradox of the archive is thus that despite its promises of clear evidence, it often just adds more troubling layers to an already complicated picture.

It is not, however, only calling upon textual evidence that these films employ to manufacture greater historical accuracy than retro-comedies aspired to. The very choice of genre already functions as an authenticating mechanism. Indeed, a precursor to such dramatic portrayals was the depiction of the invasion of August 1968 in comedies such as *Rebelové* or *Pelíšky* (*Cosy Dnes*, dir. Jan Hřebejk, 1999). The unexpected arrival of Warsaw Pact troops brought about a sudden shift in tone. Dispensing with bright colours and jokes, these films instead attempted to wrestle an emotional response from audiences through visually restrained, but all the more poignant images of loss and injustice, thus attempting to construct a more 'faithful' depiction of the past through the change of genre, invoking drama, which, in contrast to comedy, has a range of valences attached to it which associate it with realism and historical accuracy in the case of narratives set in the past.

Comedic representations of socialism throughout the first twenty-five years after the Velvet Revolution did not generate a particularly vigorous debate on the kind of interpretation of the past they presented, which contrasts with the discussions this genre stimulated in Germany.⁶⁸ As noted in chapter 3, *Pelíšky*, even with its huge popularity,⁶⁹ did not provoke any particularly noteworthy public reaction at the same time that the *Major Zeman* controversy raged in the media. Sune Bechmann Pedersen suggests that in comparison to Germany, the lack of discussion around comedies has to do with the different social status that cinema enjoys in both countries. In Germany, a number of state institutions are concerned

⁶⁸ Sune Bechmann Pedersen, 'Good Bye, Gottwald!: Communist nostalgia in Czech cinema', *Visegrad Revue*, 14 April, 2015, <http://visegradrevue.eu/good-bye-gottwald-communist-nostalgia-in-czech-cinema/> [accessed 4 August 2015].

⁶⁹ Pedersen remarks that *Pelíšky* 'sold more than one million tickets which means that a staggering 10% of the adult population saw it in theatres', not to mention the repeat viewings enabled by the film's release on DVD in 2000. Ibid.

with promoting film as a tool of political education.⁷⁰ Radim Hladík also remarks on the paucity of discussion of comedic representations of socialism in the Czech context and is one of the very few scholars to take them seriously as components of collective memory.⁷¹ Other scholars have been more dismissive of comedy as a vehicle for portraying the period, usually on the grounds that in an imagined hierarchy of genres, comedy features as less appropriate and dignified to deal with historical topics.⁷² The comedies discussed in this thesis are widely accepted as popular, in the case of films like *Pelíšky* genre-defining,⁷³ but have garnered little attention from either scholars or reviewers. Only occasionally has the dominance of comedy as the genre of representation of the socialist period become a point of discussion in the media.⁷⁴ As Hladík further suggests, the canonical status of comedy in Czech culture may also have led to the largely uncontested acceptance of such portrayals of socialism.⁷⁵

Hayden White suggests that the narration of history – what he terms historical emplotment – can successfully engage with different genres while preserving the same factual record, i.e., the same set of events can be narrated as both epic and farce with equal plausibility: ‘the conflict between “competing narratives” has less to do with the facts of the matter in question than with the different story-meanings with which the facts can be endowed by emplotment’.⁷⁶ The choice of genre in historical representation thus shapes the kinds of interpretations that can be drawn from them. In film production, hierarchies of genre are contingent on national or regional cultural traditions and are embedded

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Radim Hladík, ‘Traumatické komedie: Politika paměti v českém filmu’, *Sociální studia* 1 (2010), 9-26.

⁷² Petra Dominiková, ‘“We Have Democracy, Don’t We?” Czech Society as Reflected in Contemporary Czech Cinema,’ in *Past For the Eyes: East European Representations of Communism in Cinema and Museums after 1989*, ed. Oksana Sarkisova and Péter Apor (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), 215-244; Françoise Mayer, *Les Tchèques et leur communisme: Mémoire et identités politiques* (Paris: Editions de l’Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2004), in particular 266.

⁷³ See Karina Hoření, ‘Žádná sladkobolná selanka: Psaní o normalizačních filmech’, in *Film a dějiny 4: Normalizace*, ed. Petr Kopal (Prague: Casablanca and ÚSTR, 2014), 538-555.

⁷⁴ As noted in the previous section, Karel Strachota of the educational initiative Stories of Injustice repeatedly stated that his project aims to counter the image of the past that comedies have generated. See Ondřej Bratinka, ‘Na laskavé zobrazování normalizace jsem alergický’ [I am allergic to kindly portrayals of normalization], *Lidové noviny*, 29 October 2010, 1; Veronika Sedláčková, ‘Mýty o socialistických časech’ [Myths about socialist times – debate between Karel Strachota and Petr Zídek], *Český rozhlas - Radiožurnál*, broadcast 8 November 2010.

⁷⁵ Hladík, ‘Vážné, nevážené a znevážené vzpomínání’, 473.

⁷⁶ Hayden White, ‘Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth’, in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 37-53 (38).

in 'more general cultural legitimacies or illegitimacies'.⁷⁷ In the Czech context, despite the relatively high legitimacy of comedy, invoking non-comic genres serves to authenticate the historical representations of these films.⁷⁸ Though the hierarchy of genres has its differences in Germany, looking at the discourse around Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*, 2006), the Oscar-winning Stasi drama, is instructive. As Jason James notes, 'von Donnersmarck has been joined by many critics in characterizing *The Lives of Others* as depicting "the way things really were" in the GDR, and thus as an antidote to other films' "whitewashing" (*Verharmlosung*) of the past with sentimental, trivializing depictions'.⁷⁹ In this sense, dramatic films display an impulse to preserve something 'true' about history that they see comedy as presumably not being capable of.

In the Czech context, director Agnieszka Holland confirmed this explicitly when she described the stylistic project of the makers of *Hořící keř* in the following way:

The young people who developed the project—the writer and the young producers—had been thinking that I was the only person who could do it because I experienced it. And at the same time I was an outsider and so I could look at the history without a sort of Czech complex. And by Czech complex they meant the aversion to talking seriously about the country's problems. You know, "Let's make it funny." And the young people behind this film had grown tired of a culture that was turning everything into some kind of joke. They saw that in some ways their parents and themselves were the victims of this silence. So they wanted to reconstruct or express their roots more seriously—and re-discover their roots for themselves.⁸⁰

Here, Holland clearly sets *Hořící keř* directly in opposition to the comedic portrayals of socialism which had become standard within Czech cultural production. Reviewers of these films also praised the 'serious' tackling of historical

⁷⁷ Raphaëlle Moine, *Cinema Genre*, trans. Alistair Fox and Hilary Radner (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 21.

⁷⁸ Hladík, 471.

⁷⁹ Jason James, 'Coming to Terms through Cinema: The Lives of Others in Germany's Cultural Landscape of Memory', *Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Europe* 10, no. 2 (2010): 29–40 (29).

⁸⁰ Joshua Sperling, 'In Conversation: Agnieszka Holland with Joshua Sperling', *The Brooklyn Rail*, 18 December 2013, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2013/12/film/agnieszka-holland-with-joshua-sperling> [accessed 24 June 2014].

subjects.⁸¹ This wave of films thus makes claims to historical accuracy and a more realistic portrayal of the period than comedy. They take as their subject matter not the everyday lives of ordinary characters, but exceptional narratives of oppression, injustice, and heroism. Hladík suggests that 'in all these cases, at the centre of our attentions stand characters in direct confrontation with the regime, which appeared only episodically or marginally in comedies'.⁸² Thus, these films set up scenarios in which characters confront unjust situations, which are recounted through genres with dramatic credentials: *Pouta*, which deals with the dark practices of the StB in an atmosphere of general moral decay of the 1980s, is set up as a psychological thriller; the mendacious practices of the StB in the 1950s are also the subject of *Ve stínu*, which is stylized as a neo-noir detective film; *Hořící keř* tackles the changing social and political circumstances after the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia as a courtroom drama through the story of lawyer Dagmar Burešová and her defence of the family of Jan Palach, who self-immolated in protest of the Warsaw Pact invasion; and *Fair Play* is a personal drama about state-sanctioned doping in professional sport.

Hand-in-hand with the choice of genre comes also the visual identity of these films as a method of authentication. While comedies were often bursting with the colours of socialism, the dramatic turn is marked by a more restrained visual style. *Pouta*, which could be described as the Czech answer to *Das Leben der Anderen* (although the screenplay was allegedly written before the making of the German film),⁸³ is perhaps the first marked example of this new move. In the German case, James draws attention to von Donnersmarck's 'bold claims regarding the film's authenticity' and notes that 'Donnersmarck emphasizes the great pains taken to select a color scheme, furnishings, and other details to evoke the "feel" of the GDR in the 1980s'.⁸⁴ *Pouta* attempts to create an authentic setting in similar ways and was also praised by reviewers for effectively capturing the atmosphere of late socialism: 'through its visuals, colour scheme, camera angles that don't

⁸¹ Dominika Prejdová, 'Pocit, že za oknem prší kamení' [The feeling that it's raining down stones behind the window], *Lidové noviny*, 4 February 2010, 8; Karel Steigerwald, 'Hořící keř, konec žoviálnosti' [Hořící keř, the end of joviality], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 25 January 2013, 10; Irena Zemanová, 'Kawasakiho růže', *Hospodářské noviny*, 11 December 2009, 15.

⁸² Hladík, 467.

⁸³ Kateřina Borecká, 'Pouta bez dechu' [Pouta out of breath], *Literární noviny* (online edition), 21 January 2010, <http://www.literarky.cz/kultura/film/1889-pouta-bez-dechu> [accessed 4 September 2010].

⁸⁴ James, 35.

glamorize anything, but on the contrary set up a cool analytical distance from the heroes, its careful attention to detail as well as the overall perception of space, the film allows the time of Normalization to be felt particularly sharply'.⁸⁵ A muted colour palette in greys and browns is the main visual authenticating mechanism of *Pouta*, as well as the other films. The figuration of Normalization as grey in the popular imagination discussed in chapter 4, which *Pouta* and *Fair Play*, both set in the 1980s, effectively play on, stretches out to the whole socialist period, including the 1950s in *Ve stínu* and the late 60s in *Hořící keř*. In an interview, the director of *Ve stínu*, David Ondříček, remarked on the setting of the film: 'the costumes and props almost completely lacked warm colours, because the period lacked them too'.⁸⁶



Figure 16. *Ve stínu* (In the Shadow), David Ondříček (director, screenwriter) and Marek Epstein and Misha Votruba (screenwriters), 2012.

Visually, *Ve stínu* uses the highly stylized generic conventions of the neo-noir (Fig. 16). The main character, detective Hakl, in Ivan Trojan's elegant portrayal, never goes out without his fedora and trench coat; despite living in a modest courtyard flat, his wife (Soňa Norrisová) is always immaculately styled. What could thus be interpreted as a retro style, understood as a particular attention to period detail, is here a representation of the vestiges of a First

⁸⁵ Prejdová, 'Pocit, že za oknem prší kamení'.

⁸⁶ Tereza Spáčilová, 'Ano, chtěl bych Oscara [Yes, I would like an Oscar – interview with David Ondříček], *Reflex*, 6 September 2012, 70.

Republic elegance the characters hold onto in the immediate post-war period, the attractiveness of their outfits shrouded in the darkened colour scheme. The supposed authenticity of the décor is further evoked through the shabby exteriors, depicting a Prague falling into disrepair after years of war and early socialism. The distinction to be made between the visual style of *Ve stínu* and retro is that the former is not, as Raphael Samuel has proposed, double-edged, using the period look to cater to contemporary tastes.⁸⁷ The look of *Ve stínu* is undoubtedly attractive, but also decidedly dated: the fashions and styles of the film are not packaged to be consumed by a contemporary viewer, but to be enjoyed at a distance.



Figure 17. *Hořící keř* (Burning Bush). Agnieszka Holland (director) and Štěpán Hulík (screenwriter), 2013.

Holland's *Hořící keř* is also uniformly grey; the 'golden sixties' have definitely left with Palach's self-immolation in January 1969 in protest of the Soviet occupation, which the series takes as its starting point; the grey seventies ensue. Shot in colour, the mini-series occasionally uses black-and-white footage as a means of its own authentication (Fig. 17). As Jaroslav Pinkas observes, 'the composition of these scenes cites available documentary footage, the illusion of

⁸⁷ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 83.

authenticity is perfect'.⁸⁸ Indeed, the use of archival footage as a historical anchor was present already in *Vyprávěj* (Tell Me a Story, dir. Biser Arichtev, 2009-2013), which framed each episode in several minutes of clips from the archives of Czechoslovak Television, most often reminding viewers of period products or popular culture; at the end of the first round of archival footage, the scene would fade from black-and-white into full colour, signalling the beginning of the fictional narrative. Within the genre of a retro soap opera, these archival documents served more to create a contrast and to draw attention to the stylized portrayal of the past, while the project of *Hořící keř* is to match its visuals as closely as possible with period footage. But the visual identity of the mini-series does not make it inherently more authentic than *Vyprávěj*; as Christoph Classen argues, “authenticity” has to be historicized and contextualized. It goes without saying that the quality of things that people take to be true—the presentation techniques and iconography a display has to use to be accepted as a “true” representation of reality—changes over the course of time’.⁸⁹ Dramatic films cater to a conception of a ‘true’ image of the period given the widespread picture of socialism as a period of drabness and greyness. In the case of *Hořící keř*, its basis in true historical events and real personages is of course the most obvious authenticating mechanism.⁹⁰

As we saw in discussions around the educational initiative Stories of Injustice, and earlier in the discourse of the KPV, certain groups pushed for an understanding of national memory as predicated on an experience of historical trauma. In this view, trauma is seen as more ‘authentic’ than other competing memories, which manifested in the KPV’s rhetoric of frequently invoking their imprisonment (in Czech *kriminál*, a colloquial word for jail) as a token of their more genuine or real experience of state socialism, dismissing ideological adversaries on the basis that they do not share this lived experience and labelling them conversely as communists.⁹¹ The films of the dramatic turn generate

⁸⁸ Pinkas, ‘Hořící mramor’, 577.

⁸⁹ Christoph Classen, ‘Balanced Truth: Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List among History, Memory, and Popular Culture’, trans. Kirsten Wächter, *History and Theory* 48, no. 2 (2009): 77-102 (88).

⁹⁰ Kamil Činátl, *Naše české minulosti, aneb, jak vzpomínáme* (Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2014), 138.

⁹¹ Invoking lived experience as an authenticating mechanism has been a staple rhetorical strategy of the KPV throughout their career. For instance, KPV chair Stanislav Drobný attempted to deligitimize criticisms by Miloš Zeman, then leader of the Social Democrats, by invoking the political prisoners’ shared experience of prison: ‘We were not in jail [*v kriminále*] with Mr Zeman, Mr Zeman was a communist’. Anon., ‘Zeman podezřívá ODS z financování inzerátů Konfederace’ [Zeman suspects ODS of financing Confederation adverts], *Právo*, 29 May 1996, no pagination.

suspense through fear as an authenticating mechanism for casting the past as a collective trauma. Whereas this emotional repertoire was absent from comedies which subverted potentially threatening moments through humour, here it is not only the aforementioned StB officers who elicit fear; the grey visuals also serve to produce a constant sense of foreboding and hopelessness.

The narrative structure of these stories also participates in the positioning of the period as trauma. Fictional narratives about socialism partake in what Jeffrey Alexander terms an 'enlightenment version' of 'lay theories' of trauma,⁹² where 'the objects or events that trigger trauma are perceived clearly by actors, their responses are lucid, and the effects of these responses are problem-solving and progressive'.⁹³ In other words, by embodying evil in clear culprits, the dramatic turn links the causes of collective trauma to clear sources: the sadistic StB officer in *Kawasakiho růže*, likewise the StB, who wish to frame a crime on members of the Jewish community in *Ve stínu*, or the trainer and doctor of Anna, a young athlete in *Fair Play*, who collude to give her risky illegal drugs in order to increase her performance. What such a clear demarcation of the responsibility for wrongdoing engenders is the 'progressive' response mentioned by Alexander: if culprits can be identified, this should in theory enable justice or redemption, an assumption present in the discourse of those who advocated for the opening of the StB archives.

Here it is important to point out that the new interest in dramatic narratives about traumatic historical moments did not just concern the socialist period; the Second World War experienced renewed attention as well. Indeed, just as ÚSTR's remit was to study both 'totalitarian dictatorships', the Nazi occupation of the Czech lands saw interest from writers and filmmakers alike, with concerted efforts to cast large-scale cinematic productions as carriers of 'national memory'.⁹⁴ Kamil Činátl traces the 'formation of audience expectations',⁹⁵ marketing campaign, and authenticity effects of the films *Lidice* (Fall of the Innocent, dir. Petr Nikolaev, 2011) and *Habermannův mlýn* (Habermann, dir. Juraj Herz, 2010),

⁹² Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma', in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1-30 (2-5).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹⁴ Aside from the films discussed below, prominent literary efforts that turned to the Second World War include Radka Denemarková's *Peníze od Hitlera* (Money from Hitler, 2006) and Kateřina Tučková's *Vyhnání Gerty Schnirch* (The Expulsion of Gerta Schnirch, 2009), both of which received Magnesia Litera prizes.

⁹⁵ Činátl, *Naše české minulosti*, 131.

through which these productions aspired to becoming 'memory films'. While the former deals with the wiping out of the eponymous village by the Nazis in 1942, a universally acknowledged tragedy, the latter film approaches a topic around which there is much less social consensus, namely the post-war expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia, and in particular the spontaneous 'wild expulsion' [*divoký odsun*], during which Czech members of local communities violently turned against their German neighbours. This theme, which ÚSTR and official memory politics made sure to stay away from,⁹⁶ also comes up in the less large-scale, but equally ambitious animated film *Alois Nebel* (dir. Tomáš Luňák, 2011). These films employed many of the same tropes that depictions of socialism also made use of, particularly drama as the genre of choice for conveying trauma and its accompanying moral ambiguities, and a recourse to true stories as a means of authentication.

The choice of genre also contributes to a particular vision of heroism. Where the episodic structure of retro-comedies gave rise to self-enclosed moments of petty heroism, grand and sustained narratives require large or genuine heroic acts. The predecessor to such portrayals can be found in Jiří Stránský's works *Zdivočelá země* (A Land Gone Wild, 1991) and *Aukce* (The Auction, 1997), and their subsequent television adaptation, discussed in chapter 2, which present an all but flawless hero in the form of pilot and 'cowboy' Antonín Maděra, whose robust masculinity allows him to deal with injustice. *Ve stínu*, *Hořící keř*, and to an extent also *Fair Play*, also consciously present heroic role models: David Ondříček describes detective Hakl as a '[morally] clean hero', a type that does not appear frequently in Czech cultural representations,⁹⁷ and it is in this key component that *Ve stínu* departs from its noir models with their flawed and outcast protagonists.

Part of the heroism discourse around *Ve stínu* and *Hořící keř* consisted of a comparison of Czech traditions of heroism with Polish ones. Agnieszka Holland

⁹⁶ In fact, the founding Act on the Institute defines its remit as covering the years 1939-1945 and 1948-1989, thus avoiding the sore topic of the 'Beneš decrees', which provided a legal framework for confiscating property and revoking the citizenship of Germans living in Czechoslovakia. Act 181/2007 Coll., available at <http://www.ustrcr.cz/data/pdf/normy/act181-2007.pdf>. [Accessed 17 July 2015].

⁹⁷ Mirka Spáčilová, 'Lampa, klobouk, dlouhý pláš. Vítejte v temném světě *Ve stínu*' [Lamp, hat, long overcoat. Welcome to the dark world of *Ve stínu* - interview with David Ondříček], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 13 September 2012, 2.

called Jan Palach ‘more of a Polish hero’,⁹⁸ noting that the Czechs have a much more tortured and questioning relationship to their heroes, while the Poles celebrate theirs.⁹⁹ Ondříček also agreed with this distinction, suggesting that ‘in Poland, the Mašín brothers would have been declared national heroes long ago, while we even speculate about whether the assassination of Heydrich was worthwhile’.¹⁰⁰ Apart from celebrating Palach’s heroic act, *Hořící keř* also narrates the story of a morally upright heroine, lawyer Dagmar Burešová, who defends Palach’s family in a defamation case. Unlike the petty heroism of Šabach and other comic portrayals of socialism, which involve a level of self-reflection (recall the father’s humorous deliberations about his own sense of civic courage in *Báječná léta*), here the heroism is less reflexive and more sincere. It is here that these narratives resonate most with the new discourse on resistance and heroism in the public sphere: these are heroes who in their own way also qualify as anti-communist resistance fighters, and are not afraid to state this explicitly. In *Fair Play*, Anna refuses to take part in the Olympic Games despite having qualified, because she ‘simply will not represent this system’,¹⁰¹ as she tells her trainer and a high-up Party official.

While the heroism of retro was petty and destined to failure, the heroism of the dramatic mode is genuine; yet its results are also not guaranteed. In *Ve stínu*, this message is brought home particularly transparently in the words with which detective Hakl attempts to reassure his small son about an ‘invincible monster’ he is fighting: “If we fight with it often enough, it will get tired and weak. And perhaps then someone will beat it someday”.¹⁰² The vision of heroism these films partake in is founded on the notion of sacrifice: both Burešová and Hakl engage in fights which they know are futile; in *Fair Play*, Anna’s mother accepts being sentenced for copying illegal materials, rather than becoming an StB informer, thus sacrificing her daughter’s career as a professional athlete. In this way, the image of the hero resonates with what Zbyněk Petráček has identified as a cult of victimhood in the Czech historical imagination: the undisputed heroes of anti-communist resistance

⁹⁸ Mirka Spáčilová, ‘Nemusí jít o život. Hrdina nelže, nekrade a chodí k volbám’ [It doesn’t have to be a matter of life and death. A hero does not lie or steal and votes in elections], *Mladá fronta Dnes* [supplement ‘Hořící keř’], 25 January 2013, 53.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Mirka Spáčilová, ‘Lampa, klobouk, dlouhý plášť’, 2.

¹⁰¹ ‘Já prostě tenhle systém reprezentovat nebudu’. *Fair Play*, 2014.

¹⁰² ‘Když se s ní často budeme prát, tak se unaví a zeslábne. A třeba jí někdo jednou porazí’. *Ve stínu*, 2012.

are figures like Milada Horáková or Heliodor Píka, i.e. people who were unjustly persecuted, rather than those who actively fought back like the much-disputed Mašín brothers. As Petráček argues, the Third Resistance discourse makes both groups into heroes by co-opting the victims of the communist regime into the category of resistance fighters.¹⁰³ But despite institutional efforts at promoting an image of active, or even armed resistance, this remains fraught and is still awaiting its cinematic depiction.

In portraying grand narratives with genuine heroes, these films also have an inherent pedagogy through creating a model interpretation of history. This is not an unprecedented move: rudiments of such ambitions in relation to the past could be witnessed already in the discourse around Irena Dousková, but an educational approach to the past in representation appeared even earlier in the 1990s, in *Zdivočelá země*. The films of the late 2000s and early 2010s build on such an edifying project. In particular *Ve stínu* and *Hořící keř* were directly used for didactic purposes: *Ve stínu* was promoted as part of the National Museum's educational initiative *I zlo může být pozlátko* (Evil too can glitter), and the director of the Museum was quoted as saying that the film corresponds with the initiative's anti-totalitarian project.¹⁰⁴ *Hořící keř* has become part of the *Stories of Injustice* project, which developed a series of teaching materials relating to the film, available on their website.¹⁰⁵ Such efforts represent one of the most prominent intersections of representational culture with ongoing efforts in the public sphere, as these films were employed as educational tools to warn about the totalitarian nature of the communist regime.

Linked to this educational project is the desire of these films to become 'memory films' outside of their national context. What distinguishes them from comedies such as *Pelíšky* or *Pupendo* are their high production values and quality dramatic acting.¹⁰⁶ The production values of *Ve stínu* and *Hořící keř* in particular

¹⁰³ Zbyněk Petráček, 'Od obětí k odboji' [From victims to resistance], *Lidové noviny*, 12 August 2013, 8.

¹⁰⁴ (sen), Ondříčekův film *Ve stínu* se ohlašuje [Ondříček's film *In the Shadows* announces itself], *ČT24*, 24 August 2012, <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ct24/kultura/193214-ondrickuv-film-ve-stinu-se-ohlasuje/> [accessed 27 June 2014].

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https://www.jsns.cz/cz/lessons/4/Horici_ker_1_dil.html?lessonID=77&lesson=one&inThemeID=26 [accessed 27 June 2014].

¹⁰⁶ The question of actors and star persona in the Czech Republic has its specificities. In a country with a relatively small pool of performers, actors easily get typecast. In the Czech context, the divide between comic and dramatic actors functions particularly strongly. Thus audiences can expect films

were also consolidated by their international ambitions; in the case of *Ve stínu*, the Czech, Slovak, and Polish co-production, with American and Israeli participation, included a performance by high-profile German actor Sebastian Koch, hero of *Das Leben der Anderen*. Although featuring no international stars, *Hořící keř* was produced as a flagship transnational project of HBO Europe, which operates across the former Eastern Bloc, and was directed by an acclaimed Polish director.¹⁰⁷ These films thus attempt to transcend the small, Czech stories that comedies about socialism told; they aspire to a larger, transnational, and therefore more universal appeal. *Ve stínu*, for instance, is set in the historically and regionally specific moment of the Czechoslovak currency reform in 1953, but it will also appeal to viewers not familiar with this context, who can appreciate the film as a crime story.

It is in these efforts to create serious representations of the past which are moreover deemed accurate enough to be used as educational tools, thus positing their vision as the a 'correct' interpretation of modern Czechoslovak history, that the dramatic turn aligns itself with the first narrative strand that Boym defines in her influential typology of nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia, Boym writes, 'does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition'.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, Boym argues that the distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia provides for a differentiation between collective memory projects based on national identity and more pluralistic collective frameworks.¹⁰⁹ Through its educational ambition, the authenticity narrative can be seen as a self-proclaimed guardian of national memory and identity, which is presented as inherently democratic and opposed to any kind of oppression. David Ondříček did not hesitate to state the political agenda of *Ve stínu* in the most concise terms: 'The film is strictly anti-communist'.¹¹⁰ These films thus posit the First Republic as an implicit object of

set in the socialist past featuring Miroslav Donutil or Eva Holubová to be a comedy; the appearance of Ivan Trojan or Ondřej Malý, on the other hand, is more likely to convey dramatic credentials. In contrast, the result can be all the more persuasive when an actor who is typecast as playing positive heroes is given the role of the villain. This was the case of Ladislav Chudík's performance as a former StB officer in *Kawasikiho růže*, which earned him a Czech Lion, the prize of the Czech Film and Television Academy.

¹⁰⁷ Jindřiška Bláhová, 'Modlitba pro Jana' [Prayer for Jan], *ihned.cz*, 25 January 2013, <http://hn.ihned.cz/c1-59189500-modlitba-pro-jana> [accessed 26 June 2014].

¹⁰⁸ Boym, xviii.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

¹¹⁰ Čtk, 'Ondříček chystá premiéru filmu *Ve stínu*. Doufá v nominaci na Oscara' [Ondříček prepares premiere of the film *Ve stínu*. He is hoping for an Oscar nomination], *Týden.cz*, 5 September 2012, http://www.tyden.cz/rubriky/kultura/film/ondricek-chysta-premieru-filmu-ve-stinu-doufa-v-nominaci-na-oscar_244941.html#.U616GZRdXT0 [accessed 27 June 2014].

nostalgia, where true Czech values are to be found: the 'good cop' Hakl was trained before the Second World War and his strong moral compass is a legacy of that period. Likewise, Dagmar Burešová's similarly upright position and graciousness of manner and style in *Hořící keř* obliquely point to her coming from a 'good' First Republic family background.

But if, as I have argued in previous chapters, retro representations also engage in an anti-communist rejection of the past through their narrative structure which privileges resistance against the regime as a mechanism of moral exculpation, then what is the difference between the political agenda of retro and the films discussed above? Both narratives set the present as their interpretive framework against which they evaluate the past, and this – socialist – past, is attributed negative value. While these narratives summon different generic repertoires, they both ultimately perform an affirmative function for the present ideology, which within their narratorial worlds signifies progress from socialism. Films of the dramatic turn thematize their politics more explicitly, in that they directly portray characters who suffered under the injustices of the previous regime. Retro representations keep such suffering at the periphery of their narratives, but its hovering in the background remains central to their narrative structure, which requires a sense of evil to enable characters and viewers to assume moral positions.

In their assertion that the present is superior to the past, reading both retro and the dramatic turn through Boym's typology of nostalgia may seem somewhat counter-intuitive: on the level of representation, Czech culture displays few instances of a longing for the utopian project of socialism. With a renunciation of utopian aspirations comes a re-imagining of a Communist past in which Czechs are no longer implicated. I have attempted to avoid the term nostalgia and sought other vocabularies to capture the positive valuation of certain aspects of the past (resistance, heroism, aesthetics) in conjunction with its political rejection. Boym's typology remains useful in that it points to two salient memory modes. Retro loosely aligns with reflective nostalgia through the key ingredient of irony. As a self-reflexive mode, irony enables several layers of self-awareness in a text. Even texts like those of Petr Šabach, though transparent in the way they manufacture narrative allegiances, offer moments of reflection and even self-criticism. For instance, in the book version of *Občanský průkaz*, the now adult group of friends in

a self-aware parody of their own resistance culture act as extras in a feature film in which counter-cultural youth fights with the police. Films of the dramatic turn such as *Ve stínu* or *Hořící keř*, on the other hand, do not leave space for such self-reflexivity. They take themselves seriously, 'restoring' an authentic vision of the past, in a move reminiscent of Boym's restorative nostalgia.

While both retro and the dramatic mode create an essentially non-participatory image of socialism, where the 'system' was perpetuated either by vaguely defined communists or clearly identifiable villains (the police, the StB, the nomenclature, the Russians) who victimize positively-valued protagonists, retro representations build less obvious role models for behaviour. While they too have their principled heroes - Karel in *Vyprávěj* (see chapter 4) is a case in point - their gestures of heroism are fleeting and temporary. Yet Czech representations of socialism remain generally unified in their continued perpetuation of a totalitarian narrative of socialism, where representatives of the regime are unequivocally the 'bad guys', who are fought against by righteous and courageous - though sometimes also endearingly flawed - individuals. In this sense, the difference between the two principal modes of representation of socialism I have been describing here constitutes less of a polarized opposition than can be witnessed in the public discourse of the period, which saw a 'battle' over competing uses of historical sources, with on the one side those who wished to pinpoint culprits and laud heroes to promote a vision of a national democratic identity, and on the other side those who displayed more caution in mapping the past onto a clear-cut ethical opposition.

6.3 Epilogue. Towards a plural memory: *České století*

Not all representations can easily be identified as partaking in retro or the dramatic turn - rather these two modes can be understood as a continuum along which representations move. As seen in chapter 4, comedies that are set around the events of August 1968 slide effectively between light-hearted retro aestheticization and dramatic portrayals of collective historical experience. But significantly, not all representations fit this typology, defying placement along this continuum altogether, eliding and overcoming the two competing tendencies of

portraying the past via small petty gestures and grand heroic narratives. Such representations then also produce different and new political meanings outside of both a self-congratulatory and victimizing interpretation of the experience of socialism. This shift is exemplified by the docu-drama *České století*, which signals a move beyond the structure of narration outlined in this thesis and challenges established modes of representing the past in the Czech context.

The public broadcaster, Czech Television aired the initial five episodes of *České století*, the joint project of screenwriter Pavel Kosatík and director Robert Sedláček, in autumn 2013, with the remaining four instalments premiering a year later. The series, which in spite of its inaccurate name reconstructs key moments of Czechoslovak history in the twentieth century, provoked a remarkably sophisticated debate – both in terms of responses in the media and in the discourse of the filmmakers themselves. Focusing mainly on the highest levels of political representation, the filmmakers used their authorial licence to stage and imagine a number of behind-the-scenes and private dialogues which are not documented through any sources. The series presents a new departure for Czech historical representations, as it aligns neither with the retro-comedy model, nor – in spite of its preoccupation with ‘great men’ – with the more recent search for grand narratives. *České století* was criticised for a number of reasons – for its excessive use of the undynamic ‘talking heads’ format, the casting of certain characters, its gender dynamics, or a ‘confusing’ structure.¹¹¹ What is significant here are however not the perceived shortcomings of the series, but the discussion it sparked about the representation of historical figures.

Commentator Ondřej Štindl wrote that ‘Czech Television can congratulate itself that it managed to produce a work that is somehow alive, perhaps even provocative’¹¹² and, together with others, praised the fact that the series triggered

¹¹¹ Eva Zajíčková, ‘České století počtvrté: Ty vole, bacha, Klémo’ [České století the fourth time: Mate, watch out, Kléma], *Právo*, 18 November 2013, 21; Mirka Spáčilová, ‘Klaus a Mečiar ukončí stát i seriál. Díky, ať si jdou’ [Klaus and Mečiar will end both state and series. Thanks, let them go], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 5 December 2014, 11; Petr Zídek, ‘České století jako obskurní’ [České století as obscure], *Lidové noviny*, 20 December 2014, 24; red, ‘České století: Pěkný guláš’ [What a goulash], *A2larm.cz*, 4 November 2013, <http://a2larm.cz/2013/11/pekny-gulas/> [accessed 10 January 2016].

¹¹² Ondřej Štindl, ‘Mocní a ztracení muži’ [Powerful and lost men], *Lidové noviny*, 3 December 2013, 7.

a genuine debate.¹¹³ It should however also be noted that in the case of *České století*, the debate was restricted to perhaps an even smaller circle within an already circumscribed public sphere than some of the other examples of popular culture discussed in this thesis.¹¹⁴ The series presupposes a large degree of historical knowledge on the part of the audience and as such is aimed at a specialized segment of the public with particular levels of education or experience. Nevertheless, the debate was significant for cutting across a number of levels: it engaged not only journalists and commentators, but also eye-witnesses and even some of the historical actors portrayed in the series, in particular in relation to the episodes dealing with the more recent events of the ‘Velvet Revolution’ and the economic transformation.¹¹⁵

The series itself makes no attempts at objectivity and presents clear historical arguments – for instance, Czechoslovak communism is understood as a Soviet import; the musical Underground directly inspired Charter 77; November 1989 was not a revolution, but a deal between ‘enlightened’ communists and the Civic Forum, etc. But the interpretation of events garnered less critical attention than the portrayal of particular personages in this character-driven drama. In this, the series radically differed from the retro mode which often devised situations and character plots only in order to showcase particular aspects of the historical setting. Kosatík and Sedláček dispense with dense sets full of period markers; through focusing primarily on personalities, they set out to demythologize and de-heroicize key figures. The filmmakers thus adopted a classic strategy of

¹¹³ Petr Zídek called *České století* ‘the most debated television project of the past year’. ‘*České století jako obskurní*’ [České století as obscure], *Lidové noviny*, 20 December 2014, 24. See also Erik Tabery, ‘Jak to tehdy bylo’ [What happened back then], *Respekt*, 8 December 2014, 3.

¹¹⁴ Other projects that eschew and challenge established modes of narrating socialism precede *České století*, in particular art-house documentary and semi-documentary films. This project has, however, been concerned with fictional representations, and in particular ones that have had a complex and wide enough reception to become part of the general discourse on the socialist past.

¹¹⁵ First post-1989 Prime Minister Petr Pithart, Oskar Krejčí, advisor to the last Communist PM Ladislav Adamec, or Alexandr Vondra, a former student leader, are some of the examples of those directly involved in the events depicted in the series, who commented on their veracity as well as on the portrayal of themselves. See, e.g. Vladimír Ševela, ‘Pithart: Havla jsem na tajnou schůzku s Čalfou poslal já’ [Pithart: I sent Havel to secret meeting with Čalfa], *echo24.cz*, 3 December 2014, <http://echo24.cz/a/i8YtY/pithart-havla-jsem-na-tajnou-schuzku-s-calfou-poslal-ja> [accessed 10 September 2015]; Vladimír Ševela, ‘Z Havla udělali blbečka, říká Vondra o seriálu České století’ [They made Havel into a fool, says Vondra about České století]; *echo24.cz*, 2 December 2014, <http://echo24.cz/a/wV5Lw/z-havla-udelali-blbecka-rika-vondra-o-serialu-ceske-stoleti> [accessed 10 September 2015]; Alexandr Vondra and director Robert Sedláček polemicized on DTV, 17 December 2014, <http://video.aktualne.cz/dtv/vondra-o-ceskem-stoleti-pri-pohledu-na-havla-mi-bylo-trapne/r~e5efe9ca855511e4833a0025900fea04/> [accessed 10 September 2015].

defamiliarization to provoke a debate: historical actors perform neither petty gestures, nor attempt genuinely heroic endeavours, but are exposed as people with a number of flaws and weaknesses who engage in banal and everyday activities. We witness the second Czechoslovak president Edvard Beneš in the shower, Communist Party leaders urinating, the reformers of the Prague Spring debating in their underwear in a Moscow hotel, Václav Havel in the sauna, or one of the architects of the economic transformation gutting a fish in his swimming costume. The motif of nudity emerges repeatedly to remind the audience not only of the vulnerability, but also the ordinariness of these men of power. The fact that the series was populated almost exclusively by male characters was often remarked upon by critics;¹¹⁶ yet at the same time, it strips away some of the narratives and challenges the modes of thinking audiences may have inherited about these 'great men' in such scenes.

Probably the most debated of these everyday moments, which also points to the common expectations about the depiction of respected male figures, was the philosopher Jan Patočka expounding on the meaning of Charter 77 while opening a can of pâté. Critics questioned whether it behoves the thinker to engage in the banal act of opening a can and 'spreading pâté onto bread like a lumberjack in a forest',¹¹⁷ and found the scene contrived (on the grounds that opening the can takes an unnaturally long time), undignified, and belittling of Patočka's thought.¹¹⁸ Such reactions demonstrate that if nothing else, the authors were successful in generating unexpected and provocative images of well-known figures. The most controversial in this respect was the portrayal of Havel, whom some commentators felt to be a 'pitiable wimp'¹¹⁹ in the series: Havel's own agency is

¹¹⁶ Ondřej Štindl, 'Mocní a ztracení muži' [Powerful and lost men], *Lidové noviny*, 3 December 2013, 7; Jana Machalická, 'České století je jen mužská záležitost' [České století is a male-only affair], *Lidové noviny*, 14 December 2013, 9; Ivan Hartman, 'Století rozhněvaných mužů' [A century of angry men], *Hospodářské noviny*, 14 November 2014, 20.

¹¹⁷ Jiří Peňás, 'Kde si opatřit bony? U Havlů...' [Where to get vouchers? At the Havels'...], *Lidové noviny*, 25 November 2014, 1.

¹¹⁸ The weekly *Respekt* even published an article entitled 'Patočka's can' [*Patočkova konzerva*], which analysed the surprising attention this scene had provoked. Jaroslav Spurný, 'Patočkova konzerva', *Respekt*, 1 December 2014, 32.

¹¹⁹ See, for instance, Petr Zídek, 'Havel jako ňouma' [Havel as a wimp], *Lidové noviny*, 13 December 2014, 10; Jan Rychetský, 'Velké prázdno po Havlovi. Monika Pajerová už ale tuší, kdo ho zaplní' [A great emptiness after Havel. Monika Pajerová already knows who might fill it], *Parlamentní listy*, 16 December 2014; Vladimír Ševela, 'Z Havla udělali blbečka, říká Vondra o seriálu České století' [They made Havel into a fool, says Vondra about České století]; *echo24.cz*, 2 December 2014, <http://echo24.cz/a/wV5Lw/z-havla-udelali-blbecka-rika-vondra-o-serialu-ceske-stoleti> [accessed 10 September 2015].

downplayed as he is often found reacting to the impulses of others rather than presenting his own agenda. As the broadcast of the episodes featuring Havel roughly coincided with the third anniversary of his death, it also generated a broader discussion of the former dissident's and president's legacy. Should Havel be remembered in the way *České století* portrays him? What other aspects of his life, work, and personality deserve highlighting? These were the questions that commentators who had known the former president personally, such as Martin Šimečka or Daniel Kroupa, asked in the press.¹²⁰

The refusal to ascribe heroism to figures like Havel was often remarked upon and it is a feature the filmmakers themselves highlighted.¹²¹ Film critic Tomáš Baldýnský suggested that the effectiveness of *České století* is diminished by the fact that Czech culture lacks 'conformist works against which they [Sedláček and Kosatík] could define their own non-conformity'.¹²² Baldýnský draws attention to the absence of a national canon of grand heroic narratives about the socialist past and 1989 in particular. Arguably, this is precisely the space that films of the dramatic turn have attempted to fill, though Baldýnský's comment highlights that their aspiration to becoming received memory films may require more sedimentation or has simply not been successful. As I have argued, *Ve stínu* and *Hořící keř* strive to introduce heroism as a moral category into the memory of socialism, not only through their own textual devices, but also through the filmmaker's own discourse around them. Sedláček quoted *Hořící keř* in particular as a portrayal of the past that avoids any kind of ambiguity, which he aimed to counter with his project.¹²³

What was novel about the discussion around *České století* was on the one hand the wide spectrum of opinions that accompanied the series – ranging from approval to complete disagreement – and also the consistent recognition in the

¹²⁰ Martin M. Šimečka, 'Jiný Václav Havel' [A different Václav Havel], *Respekt*, 8 December 2012, 14; Libuše Frantová, 'Čas pracuje pro Václava Havla' [Time is working in Václav Havel's favour], *Parlamentní listy*, 10 December 2014, <http://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/rozhovory/Cas-pracuje-pro-Vaclava-Havla-Lide-si-postupne-zacinaji-uvedomovat-velikost-a-vyznam-jeho-dilarka-filozof-349413> [accessed 11 September 2015].

¹²¹ Pavel Kosatík noted in an interview that 'for me, there is no such thing as an ideal hero'. Petr Andreas, 'Co je to být Čechem?' [What does it mean to be a Czech?], *A2*, 19 June 2013, 21.

¹²² Tomáš Baldýnský, 'Pravda vítězí' [Truth wins], *Lidové noviny*, 3 December 2014, 20.

¹²³ Jan Bělíček and Jaroslav Fiala, 'Režisér Sedláček: Jsem Pujmanová kapitalismu' [Director Sedláček: I am the Pujmanová of capitalism], *A2larm.cz*, 22 December 2014, <http://a2larm.cz/2014/12/reziser-sedlacek-jsem-pujmanova-kapitalismu/> [accessed 11 September 2015].

media that the way events and personages were depicted reflected the personal interpretation of the filmmakers. 'I am the Pujmanová of capitalism',¹²⁴ Sedláček proclaimed in an interview, referring to the canonical author of pro-communist socialist realist literature, and noted that 'we are now filming history in service of the current regime. I'm afraid that I'm not enough of a genius to be able to overcome the prejudices of my time'.¹²⁵ This understanding that the historical interpretation offered is viewed through the prism of present political values moved the debate to a new level. The filmmakers acknowledged that their reading of the twentieth century is constructed so as to posit the present political constellation as its only possible outcome. The way to combat this inherent problem of retrospective historical retelling is to make the resulting representation open to a plurality of readings: as Kosatík remarked in an interview, 'national memory, or whatever we should call it, has a tendency towards simplification. People are black and white in it, some are good, others are bad. (...) In my opinion it is an unproductive attitude, which needs to be returned closer to the truth by complicating it'.¹²⁶ By avoiding the established patterns of both a self-congratulatory or victimizing narrative, the series made no effort to take up the role of a memory film that would present a cohesive, national mythology. In this sense, as one reviewer remarked, *České století* successfully fulfilled its mission as public broadcasting by enabling a multiplicity of interpretations of the past to emerge.¹²⁷ The fact that *České století* offered interpretations of recent historical events that are open to challenge and criticism makes it a site of productive contestation of the past in which history is not used to promote the memory of any particular group. The series was a niche project aimed at a specific audience and as such hardly signals a major new trend in the way the socialist past is dealt with in mainstream popular culture; nevertheless, it does demonstrate that representations can actively intervene in memory processes and instead of positing a single vision of the past can serve to question it.

After the initial surge of institutional attempts of managing the legacies of communist rule in the early 1990s, the narrativization of the socialist past settled

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ondřej Suchan, 'Havla jsem hledal nejdéle' [The search for Havel took the longest], *Lidové noviny*, 19 April 2014, 2.

¹²⁶ Andreas, 'Co je to být Čechem?', 21.

¹²⁷ Kamil Fila, 'Havel pro každého' [Havel for everyone], *Respekt*, 24 November 2014, 92.

comfortably into the retro mode towards the end of the 1990s and for some years, this ironic form of detached aestheticization of the past dominated the cultural memory of the period. *České století* testifies to the more recent dynamism of the Czech memory landscape, which saw the rise of large societal narratives and a preoccupation with collective remembrance in the mid-2000s, as well as increasing criticism of tendencies towards constructing a nationally-inflected official memory politics. The narrativization of socialism moved from a concern with the private and the familial into the sphere of the public; although the new narratives of the dramatic turn are still based around the private lives of their protagonists, these become caught up in public events. The pastiche pick-and-mix approach to the past of retro is only made narratable through small, self-enclosed episodes of ordinary moments based on personal memory. Drama strives for a large narrative of the extraordinary, a move which writers and filmmakers often sought to validate through the public memory of the archive.

As anti-communism began to erode as the dominant grand narrative of the post-socialist era, the totalitarian interpretation witnessed a fortification in the form of its institutionalization in ÚSTR and in the rise of tendencies to identify villains and heroes, both in public life and in representational culture. I have argued that retro comedies also tended to portray the past through the template of 'us and them', a binary of good and evil. In their focus on the 'ordinary' people between representatives of the state's authority and open dissidents or resistance fighters, and in the absence of heroism, retro narratives elided questions of responsibility and consensus, which were relegated to the sphere of 'the regime'. While I have shown that the stories of the dramatic turn are not vastly different in keeping alive a totalitarian interpretation of socialism, the difference to retro lies in the more intense moralization of their discourse. Both official efforts at promoting a particular memory of resistance and narratives which had a figure of embodied evil at their core used ethical categories no longer to simply say 'it wasn't us' as retro had, but to employ exemplary, educational tales to project a sense of a democratic national identity of a people who know who its heroes are and who can deal with perpetrators – an ambition that retro did not have.

With the slow disintegration of the anti-communist story and the greater plurality of opinion in the public sphere, the need to present strong model narratives about the past grew. However, this need manifested along a varying

scale of intensity and it is not possible nor desirable to separate retro and the dramatic turn as a binary – rather, this chapter has shown the rise of several tendencies, such as heroicization, educational ambitions, or a strive for greater authenticity through historical documents, which manifested to differing degrees in specific representations and public debates. The case of *České století* suggests that representational culture can pose challenges to dominant narratives. It is possible that these processes will continue as further contestations of visions of a national memory are presented. In the literary field, Jan Novák has already attempted an extensive biographical reconstruction of the story of the Mašín brothers.¹²⁸ Czech cinema or television may thus also see a counter-reaction in an attempt to reclaim more controversial aspects of the past – whether the story of the Mašíns, or, for instance, the exploits of agents who smuggled people across Czechoslovakia's borders in the early years of communist rule – for a heroic blockbuster.

¹²⁸ Jan Novák, *Zatím dobrý* (Brno: Petrov, 2004). The 800-page novel, which enjoyed generally positive reviews, including from *České století* screenwriter Pavel Kosatík, was awarded a Magensia Litera prize in 2005. See Pavel Kosatík, 'Mašini, nebo major Zeman!', *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 24 July 2004, 2.

Conclusion: socialism remembered

For the first twenty-five years after the collapse of state socialism in the Czech Republic, concerns with how to evaluate the period of Communist Party rule remained topical. Was it a totalitarian regime? Who is responsible? Was resistance against it legitimate? Such questions continued to stir public debates, surfacing in particular around 17 November each year, the anniversary of the beginning of the 'Velvet Revolution' of 1989. This date also commemorates Nazi violence against students in 1939, later observed as International Students' Day. It was this anniversary that spurred students in 1989 to hold a peaceful demonstration, which went on to spark a much wider wave of protests that eventually brought down the ruling regime. Today, it is observed as the Day of Struggle for Freedom and Democracy and is a national holiday in the Czech Republic. Traditionally, 17 November was an occasion for students – and the former student leaders of 1989 – to gather in the university district of Albertov in Prague and at Národní třída, where police forces brutally beat up demonstrators in 1989, to celebrate the ideals and values that the protestors had demanded and which the new order promised to deliver: democracy, freedom, plurality, openness, a return to Europe. The media used the occasion to reflect upon the successes and failures of the Czech *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and to reinvigorate discussions about the continued legacies of the previous regime within society and their effects on political culture.

In 2015, however, 17 November brought a distinct change, which is emblematic of a wider discursive shift in the Czech public sphere. The traditional gathering of students and citizens at Albertov was blocked by the police, because the space had been booked out earlier by the civic initiative Block Against Islam [*Blok proti islámu*] – with special guest President Miloš Zeman.¹ Students and academics organized an alternative gathering at Albertov on 22 November,² with

¹ iDnes.cz, ČTK, 'Policejní blokáda Albertova zneuctila 17. listopad, miní děkan i studenti' [Police blockade of Albertov defiled 17 November, says dean and students], *iDnes.cz*, 18 November 2015, http://zpravy.idnes.cz/dekan-studenti-i-ucitele-ztratili-letos-na-albertove-svobodu-ptn-/domaci.aspx?c=A151118_152653_domaci_zt [accessed 12 January 2016]. The President's supporters made sure to book this symbolic location most probably because the previous year it had been the site of protests against Zeman, during which he was pelted with eggs. See (jw), 'Házení vajec na prezidenta Zemana vyšetřuje policie' [Throwing of eggs at President Zeman being investigated by police], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 13 December 2014, 2.

² sts, 'Na Albertově se sešli studenti, aby oslavili náhradní 17. listopad' [Students met at Albertov to celebrate replacement 17 November], *Novinky.cz*, 22 November 2015,

the Student Council of the Faculty of Arts of Charles University stating that they 'strongly protest against the efforts to use student symbolism for the needs of specific political representation'.³ The celebrations of the 'Velvet Revolution' were suddenly no longer framed by turning back to the past, but by pressing problems of the present, namely reactions to a number of European-wide crises in 2015, which the President's gathering directly addressed.⁴ Although reflection upon the legacies of communist rule has by no means disappeared, the first twenty-five years after 1989 have shown themselves to be more of a discrete and self-enclosed era than could have been anticipated at the beginning of this research.

This thesis argued that the dominant anti-communist narrative in the Czech Republic served to draw attention away from current problems and their roots in present circumstances, as it provided a discursive space to dismiss negative social, cultural, and political phenomena as legacies of the socialist past. But the issues that 17 November brought to the fore in 2015 – a rising xenophobia and nationalism – were referenced less by the country's authoritarian past, and more by phenomena whose origins can no longer be traced to state socialism. Although I do not wish to dramatically declare an 'end of post-socialism', in less categorical terms it is possible to say that the grand narrative of anti-communism that dominated previous celebrations of this holiday has been overshadowed by a revival of narratives concerned with questions of an ethnically and religiously conceived 'nation' – concerns which had of course been prominent in post-socialist public discourse, but which have newly taken over the anniversary of the 'Velvet Revolution'. For this reason, I have entitled this thesis 'Socialism Remembered', using the past participle – which is not to say that the memory processes relating to the socialist past are in any way finished, but that the era in which these

<http://www.novinky.cz/domaci/387070-na-albertove-se-sesli-studenti-aby-oslavili-nahradni-17-listopad.html> [accessed 12 January 2016].

³ iDnes.cz, ČTK, 'Policejní blokáda Albertova zneuctila 17. listopad, míní děkan i studenti'.

⁴ In particular, the events of 17 November responded to the massive influx of refugees from Syria and other war-torn countries into the European Union in 2015, which domestically manifested in the rise of xenophobic and extremist groups and sentiments. Apart from the above-mentioned Block Against Islam, a number of other anti-Muslim protests and initiatives emerged, including 'We Don't Want Islam in the Czech Republic' [*Islám v ČR nechceme*]. The Czech government stood against the EU in refusing to accept European plans on the redistribution of refugees. Several thousand academics signed an appeal 'against fear and indifference' in August 2015 (<http://www.vyzvavedcu.cz/> [accessed 13 January 2016]). The refugee crisis and accompanying xenophobic discourse (as well as reactions against it) continued to dominate the media throughout the rest of the year and into 2016.

processes occupied a prominent space in public discourse is gradually coming to an end.

As I discussed, a rejection of the forty years of communist rule had provided a convenient grand narrative for the new, post-socialist era: state socialism was seen as a deviation from Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic's naturally democratic path. The result was a projection of a Manichean vision of the relationship between socialism and liberal democracy: the former was relegated to the land of evil, while the latter was seen as inherently good. But recent events gave rise to a new moral binary that took hold of the public sphere. In the language of the many anti-Islamist initiatives that sprung up in the wake of the influx of large numbers of refugees fleeing war-torn regions in the Middle East and Africa into Europe – which, as President Zeman's endorsement of the Block Against Islam as well as the activities of various mainstream media has have shown,⁵ is becoming increasingly acceptable – Czech Republic was portrayed as the guardian of democratic, 'European', and Christian values. In short, public discourse had found its new 'Other' in the Muslim refugees, who were often described in a militaristic vocabulary as 'hordes' who are 'invading' fortress Europe'⁶ (echoing ever-recurring visions of communism as an incarnation of 'Asiatic despotism').⁷ This is a vocabulary that the Czech Republic shared with other countries in the Visegrad

⁵ For instance, the daily *Právo* came under criticism for giving space to a text by conspiracy theorist Martin Herzán, whose alarmist report on conditions in a refugee camp in the Balkans was later exposed to contain a number of falsehoods. See Martin Herzán, 'Obří migrační vlna: všechna rozumná pravidla padla' [Massive migration wave: All rational rules are gone], *Právo*, 4 February 2016, 16. For a counter-reaction, see Jakub Patočka, 'Jak se Právo pokusilo své lhaní o uprchlících zamaskovat dalším lhaním' [How Právo attempted to mask its lying about refugees with more lying], *Deník Referendum*, 17 February 2016, <http://denikreferendum.cz/clanek/22318-jak-se-pravo-pokusilo-sve-lhani-o-uprchlicich-zamaskovat-dalsim-lhanim> [accessed 14 March 2016]. Less extremist and more cautious assessments of the alleged threat posed by refugees to European culture and values were however common across the daily press and voiced by numerous commentators from the liberal camp, as expressed for instance by Michal Klíma, rector (provost) of the Metropolitan University in Prague, in a long essay for *Právo*. Michal Klíma, 'Politika salónního humanismu selhala' [The politics of armchair humanism has failed], *Právo*, 18 February 2016, 7.

⁶ President Zeman's use of such rhetoric even caught the attention of the foreign press, Czech media reported. See Pavlína Kindlová, "'Organizovaná invaze Evropy". Zemanův vánoční projev zaujal britská média' ["An organized invasion of Europe". Zeman's Christmas speech drew attention from the British media], *lidovky.cz*, http://www.lidovky.cz/organizovana-invaze-evropy-zemanuv-vanocni-projev-zaujal-britska-media-1o9-/zpravy-svet.aspx?c=A151227_121756_ln_zahranici_ele [accessed 14 February 2016].

⁷ Michal Kopeček, 'In Search of "National Memory"', In Search of "National Memory": The Politics of History, Nostalgia and the Historiography of Communism in the Czech Republic and East Central Europe', in *Past in the Making: Historical Revisionism in Central Europe After 1989*, ed. Michal Kopeček (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2007), 75-95 (77).

region, which witnessed similar moods in response to the refugee crisis and European terrorist attacks of 2015.⁸



Figure 18. Anti-refugee protests in Prague, 6 February 2016. Photo Barbora Kleinhamplová.

While the institutional and representational search for heroes discussed in this thesis attempted to find positive role models in the socialist past, to legitimate their claims, nationalist and xenophobic groups are looking for heroes elsewhere, turning to older, more haloed periods. The 1683 Battle of Vienna, in which the combined forces of the Holy Roman Empire and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth beat the Ottoman army, has become a staple of anti-Islamist discourse as an example of a time when ‘Europeans rulers, unlike the EU, did not face this threat [of Islamization] passively’,⁹ as a commentator on *Parlamentní listy*, an online platform that provides space for various radical opinions, wrote.

On 6 February 2016, a number of anti-refugee and anti-Islam initiatives took to the streets. While one of the chief ideologues of the anti-Islam movement, sociologist Petr Hampl, alluded to the death of last of the Czech Jagiellonians in the

⁸ This rhetoric was perhaps best encapsulated by the cover of Polish magazine *W sieci* (In the Network) from 13 February 2016, which featured a photo of a blonde woman draped in a European flag being groped by three pairs of dark-skinned male hands, accompanied by the caption ‘The Islamic Rape of Europe’. See <http://www.wsieci.pl/wsieci-islamski-gwalt-na-europie-pnews-2681.html> [accessed 18 February 2016].

⁹ Přemysl Votava, ‘Turek před Vídní’ [The Turk before Vienna], *Parlamentní listy*, 5 January 2015, <http://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/nazory-a-petice/Premysl-Votava-Turek-pred-Vidni-352809> [accessed 18 February 2016].

Battle of the Mohács at the hands of ‘our age-old enemy’,¹⁰ the Turks, onlookers invoked the tradition of the Crusaders as militarized Christian fighters against Islam (Fig. 18). This shift in the horizon of the historical imagination is paradoxical to say the least in a cultural space where, as historian Jiří Rak discusses in his study of Czech national mythology,¹¹ it was the Hussites who were revered as national heroes by nineteenth century national revivalists, first democratic president Masaryk, and the communists alike – and who were also the target of the Crusades.

Such uses of history, however, are not the domain of civic initiatives and media commentators alone; official memory politics has also joined the move to seek inspiration in the medieval period. A group of cross-party MPs proposed to officially celebrate the date of birth of Emperor Charles IV as the ‘day of the union of the Přemyslid and Luxembourg dynasties’, which in their interpretation led to a ‘strengthening of Czech statehood’ in 1316.¹² In an article criticizing the proposal, art historian Milena Bartlová noted that despite Charles IV undoubtedly having been a significant European monarch, ‘any operations of memory politics, of which the designation of a day of commemoration is a distinctive example, are not concerned with what he was “really” like, but solely with our own present day and power relations within it’.¹³ Bartlová thus summed up one of the key points that I have repeatedly underscored in this thesis in relation to the socialist past, but its application is wider: the memory of a historical event or period reveals little about that particular history and more about present political agendas, whether they are used directly in the party political arena, or contribute to wider cultural narratives that value aspects of the past in order to promote certain groups or define political or national communities as opposed to a perceived Other.

Despite all of this, the medieval fascination is nothing new: in 2005, Charles IV was voted the ‘Greatest Czech’ in an eponymous popular vote contest (although only after the real winner, Jára Cimrman, had been disqualified for being a fictional

¹⁰ Petr Hampl’s speech at the manifestation ‘Europe Against Islamization’, 6 February 2016. Transcript available at <http://petrhampl.com/pevnost-nebo-kavarna> [accessed 18 February 2016].

¹¹ Jiří Rak, *Bývali Čechové: české historické mýty a stereotypy* (Jinočany: H&H, 1994).

¹² Čtk, ‘Den narození Karla IV. bude významným dnem, navrhli poslanci’ [The birthday of Charles IV. will be a day of observance, MPs propose], *Aktualne.cz*, 11 February 2016, <http://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/den-narozeni-karla-iv-bude-vyznamnym-dnem-navrhli-poslanci/r~ab913514d0bc11e5a0ca0025900fea04/> [accessed 19 February 2016].

¹³ Milena Barlová, ‘Slavit narození Karla IV. je nebezpečná hloupost’ [Celebrating Charles IV.’s birthday is a dangerous folly], *A2larm.cz*, 17 February 2016, <http://a2larm.cz/2016/02/slavit-narozeni-karla-iv-je-nebezpecna-hloupost/> [accessed 19 February 2016].

character).¹⁴ Likewise, nationalism that turns against a perceived Other has an established, and at times violent tradition, in the form of Czech anti-Roma sentiment.¹⁵ The difference now is that such attitudes are quickly transferring from the domain of marginal groups into the sphere of mainstream media and political discourse.¹⁶

In this thesis, I have been dealing not with narratives coming from the margins, but on the contrary, I have traced dominant discourses. I argued that the memory of socialism, as articulated in cultural production and in the media, with its conspicuous feature of nostalgia for resistance and general anti-communist timbre, is a narrative told by the winners of the transformation, i.e. those who want to be seen as having successfully overcome socialism and endorsed the new political order, a group to which cultural producers have largely demonstrated their allegiance. I have thus told a story in which I outlined how a cultural elite has conceptualized its relation to the socialist past, even though representations of socialism often wish to speak on behalf of 'ordinary' people and their small, everyday petty gestures of heroism. Through their narrative structure, Czech representations of socialism extend an invitation to their (often broad) audiences to be implicitly included into the community of 'us' – those who were always opposed to 'them', the communists. Nostalgia and a totalitarian conception of the past thus sit comfortably side by side, I have argued. Such an attitude, however, is not a uniquely Czech phenomenon: protagonists, usually young adults, who define themselves against authority as a sign of their rebellion, can be found across representations of the past in the former Eastern Bloc. Rather, the paradoxical

¹⁴ See Ondřej Šťastný, 'Největší Čech: Jára Cimrman' [Greatest Czech: Jára Cimrman], *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 2 February 2005, 5; and (jp, ČTK), 'Největším Čechem Karel IV.' [Charles IV greatest Czech], *Právo*, 11 June 2005, 1.

¹⁵ Pavel Šplíchal, 'Anticiganismus versus islamofobie' [Anti-gypsyism vs Islamophobia], *A2larm.cz*, 19 February 2016, <http://a2larm.cz/2016/02/anticiganismus-versus-islamofobie/> [accessed 23 February 2016].

¹⁶ An example of the 'tabloidization' of the media in relation to anti-Islamic sentiment was a controversy that emerged when the well-regarded weekly *Respekt* published classified information on negotiations and ransom that the Czech government had paid for two Czech women who had been kidnapped by terrorists in Pakistan in 2013. The magazine came under critique for playing to anti-Islamist moods by implying that the government had 'wasted' money on two 'irresponsible' women who had most likely been radicalized and now presented a security threat. For the original article that sparked the debate, see Ondřej Kundra, 'Teroristy za turisty' [Terrorists for tourists], *Respekt*, 8 February 2016, 34. For reactions, see Tereza Engelová, 'Proč se o tomhle nikdy nemělo psát?' [Why this should never have been written about], *Echo24.cz*, 7 February 2016, <http://echo24.cz/a/ikDez/proc-se-o-tomhle-nikdy-nemelo-psat> [accessed 2 March 2016]; Apolena Rychlíková, 'Cena lidského života' [The price of a human life], *A2larm.cz*, 9 February 2016, <http://a2larm.cz/2016/02/cena-lidskeho-zivota/> [accessed 2 March 2016].

dynamic of the positive valuation of the repressive aspects of the regime as something that protagonists define their identities against has been ignored in other national contexts; this significant feature of the memory of socialism presents avenues for further investigation throughout the post-socialist region.

By assuming that readers and viewers shared a condemnation of the past regime, which became a given, representations could set politics aside and indulge in the aesthetics of the past, which was thus divested of any political threat. In a departure from other discussions of nostalgia in the post-socialist space, and German *Ostalgie* in particular, which have focused on the memory of positive aspects of the state socialist past or the resistant potential of nostalgia as an anti-hegemonic practice of those who lost out in the systemic transformations, I conceptualized such a dynamic as retro. This mode of consuming the past 'without memory' marries an aesthetic attraction to socialism with an acknowledgment and simultaneous condemnation of its authoritative nature, and draws on the notion of successfully having overcome the period together with a somewhat complacent congratulatory narrative of 'knowing better' from a retrospective vantage point.

Arguably, the political interpretation of the past coalesces most clearly around ideas of heroism. What I have called 'petty heroism' did not build obvious role models for behaviour. The failure of resistance in comedic representations, which dominated the Czech cultural memory of socialism in the first decade and a half after 1989, was apologetic and conciliatory, creating an essentially non-participatory image of the past, where the 'system' was perpetuated by representatives of authority (the police, the StB, the nomenclature, the Russians). By contrast, drama, which took off as a prominent force in portraying the past around 2005, focuses not on everyday narratives, but on tales of heroic exceptionalism, pitted against villains who embody the evil side of the regime. By polarizing the opposition between heroes and villains, drama introduced a moralizing language that presented genuine gestures of those who rose up against oppression. In the case of moments of collective resistance such as 1968, resistant credentials were extended to the general population, otherwise implicitly held in check by the ruling power.

Through presenting clear heroes as models of identification, the dramatic turn also harboured didactic ambitions of teaching by example. Official memory politics has been particularly receptive to propagating the memory of the political

prisoners of the 1950s, who through the 2011 Act on Third Resistance have been rhetorically elevated from victims to resistance fighters, and while the armed anti-communist opposition of the 1950s is still waiting for its cinematic representation, the 'search for heroes' in recent Czech film can be seen within a wider context of attempted heroization of resistance. The political dimension of this new mode of representation can be found in the vision of a patriotic national identity that was less traceable in the petty heroism of retro.

The dramatic turn illustrates that cultural production had increasingly become concerned with issues of national memory already before the rise of openly nationalist sentiment that the crises of 2015 brought about. This is not to say that a genealogy can be traced between these two phenomena, but rather to underscore the point that the developments of 2015 have not emerged spontaneously; concerns with narrating larger, 'national' dimensions of history had been circulating in the public sphere throughout recent years. At the same time, the socialist period has by no means disappeared from public discourse, even if it does appear somewhat side-lined. Certainly many liberal intellectuals not only in the Czech Republic are still ready to cast the current situation as a result of the legacies of socialism.¹⁷ This testifies that the memory processes in relation to the previous regime have not been exhausted yet, though the rejection of the past that formed the grand narrative of 'coming to terms' with the communist rule is being increasingly challenged by new genres of representation, rigorous historical research, and a ferment of new media voices. Yet with the rise of new large societal narratives, remembering socialism in the ways discussed in this thesis may itself gradually be slipping into the realm of the past.

¹⁷ In this view, the socialist past is responsible for poorly internalized values of liberal democracy, which is seen as the cause of negative attitudes towards refugees. Commentators advocating this line of argumentation generally lament a culture of 'democracy without democrats'. See, e.g. Kamil Švec, 'KOMENTÁŘ: Vyčpělá demokracie. Zeman musí respektovat i "řvoucí stádo"' [Commentary: Stale democracy. Zeman must respect even the "shouting herd"], *idnes.cz*, 17 November 2015, http://zpravy.idnes.cz/komentar-kamila-svece-k-vyroci-listopadu-fpa-/domaci.aspx?c=A151117_170208_domaci_ale [accessed 14 March 2016]; Martin Fendrych, 'Pegida v nás: Co má Sasko společného s Českem a jak nás minulost drží v drápech' [Pegida in us: What Saxony has to do with Czech Republic and how the past holds us in its grip], *Aktualne.cz*, 24 February 2016, <http://nazory.aktualne.cz/komentare/pegida-v-nas-co-ma-sasko-spolecneho-s-ceskem/r~b2256e50dad911e59e52002590604f2e/> [accessed 24 February 2016]. Such logic has been applied by commentators to the region as a whole as well. See, for instance, Paul Hockenos, 'The Stunning Hypocrisy of Mitteleuropa', *Foreign Policy*, 10 September 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/10/the-stunning-hypocrisy-of-mittleuropa-refugees-poland-hungary-czech-republic/> [accessed 24 February 2016].

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