American Journal of Cultural Sociology
https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-021-00130-5

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Knowing through feeling: the aesthetic structure of a novel and the iconic experience of reading

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Accepted: 4 March 2021
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Abstract

Following the strong program in cultural sociology, I propose a "literary turn" to recognize literary texts "as relatively autonomous cultural entities" with their own agency. This article is part of a larger project connecting cultural sociology with the sociology of literature and literary theory to develop a *strong program in the sociology of literature*. Instead of approaching literary fiction as an object of analysis, sociology and literature can contribute to social knowledge in a *symmetrical* way, where fiction is not devalued vis-à-vis social scientific inquiry. Just the opposite: recognizing the specificities of literary communication, we can access textures of social life that are only hardly graspable by sociology. A crucial step is to examine how social knowledge comes into existence when reading a fictional text. Embracing the structural aesthetics of Roman Jakobson and Jan Mukařovský, I modify the concept of iconicity to capture the *iconic experience of reading* through which literature mediates social experience that is *iconic* of broader social phenomena. I demonstrate my approach by analyzing the Czech novel *Bliss was it in Bohemia* by Michal Viewegh (Bliss was it in Bohemia, Jantar Publishing, London, 1992). Building on social aesthetics, I discuss implications of my model for sociological theory, textual representation, and sociological explanation in general.

Keywords Sociology of literature · Iconicity · Social aesthetics · Structural aesthetics · Post-communism · Lyrical sociology

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Published online: 08 April 2021

Introduction

> In the absence of an adequate social science, critics and novelists, dramatists and poets have been the major, and often the only, formulators of private troubles and even of public issues. Art does express such feelings… but still not with the intellectual clarity required for their understanding or relief today. (Mills 1959, p. 18)

In the citation above, Charles W. Mills expresses a common belief of social scientists that literature often does a better job in mediating social life than social sciences but lacks the proper "intellectual clarity" to understand it. Historically, various authors agreed that literature is a "mode of knowledge" (Levin 1965, p. 149), which to a great extent has "autonomous power… in analysing its contemporary social scene" (Pincott 1970, p. 180). Austin Harrington (2004, p. 3) even claims that literature "can tell us about society that social science cannot tell us." Trevor Noble (1976, p. 212) agrees with him that "[n]ovels tell much more about society than any sociological commentary." Also, Robert Nisbet (1962, p. 69) recognizes that literature adopts a specific "mode of knowledge … by which man arrives at an understanding of his environment" and is of no less importance than sociological inquiry. However, despite the longstanding enthusiasm toward literary texts, sociologists fail to embrace the unique social knowledge mediated by literature in its full scope. Literature renders the view of societies "from the inside" which is "*formally distinct* from either non-fiction or theoretical argument" (Felski 2008, pp. 88–91; emphasis mine). To deal with this difference, sociological studies often subsume literary fiction into the sociological frameworks, approaching literature as data to be translated or converted into sociological discourse (Váňa 2020a, p. 184). As an inspiration, an example of a sociological issue, or a source of sociological imagination (Váňa 2020b, pp. 6–7), literature has been treated as sociology's powerless *sidekick* lacking the "certified knowledge" (Coser 1963, p. 3; cf. Watson 2016, p. 433).[1]

My research model seeks to make up for this deficiency. Following the strong program in cultural sociology (Alexander and Smith 2003), I propose a "literary turn" in cultural sociology in order to recognize literary texts "as relatively autonomous cultural entities, 'independent variables' resisting the judgmental eye of an analyst while allowing strong explanatory theories to infer knowledge about general social phenomena" (Váňa 2020c, p. 15). Therefore, I suggest an epistemological–theoretical shift to form an alliance between literature and sociology—a mutually respectful partnership where both sides contribute to the social knowledge in a *symmetrical* way. Following Alexander's and Smith's (2003, p. 13) inspiration by the "strong program" in science studies, I go a step further. David Bloor (1976, p. 5) famously defined the third principle of the strong program in the sociology of scientific knowledge as the principle of symmetry: "It would be symmetrical in its style of explanation. The same types of cause would explain, say, true and false beliefs."

[1] Lewis Coser's (1963) *Introductory Reader* being a classic example; see also a more recent reader by Edling and Rydgren (2010).

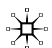
I introduce the symmetry principle into the sociological studies of literature. To be symmetric "means not to impose a priori some spurious *asymmetry* among" (Latour 2005, p. 76; emphasis original) fictional and non-fictional.[2] Literary fiction should not be treated as less "objective" because of its literariness or fictitiousness. Just the opposite: the *strong program in the sociology of literature* will access literature as an autonomous source of social knowledge, which due to its aesthetic aspects can mediate textures of social life that are only hardly graspable by sociology.

My model is based on three main principles. First, and most importantly, I seek ways to let literature *speak for itself*. Therefore, I focus on *what is going on during the reading*. I conceive reading as a dynamic interaction between the text and the reader, through which social knowledge is mediated as a part of the aesthetic experience. The aesthetic experience does not exist *besides* the communicative and cognitive aspects (cf. Thumala Olave 2020, p. 2), but it makes communication possible in the first place. I approach the aesthetic experience of reading as the central analytical unit of my model. The point of departure is the phenomenology of reading of the Constance School of Reception Aesthetics (Iser 1972; Jauss 1982) informed by the hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur (1976, 1981). Second, I probe into the text's insides, exploring how it communicates by means of aesthetic devices. Since "all forms of knowing… rely on an array of formal resources" (Felski 2008, p. 83), I do not narrow the text to its content or informational value. My model employs the structural aesthetics developed by linguists Jan Mukařovský (1971, 1978) and Roman Jakobson (1960) within the *Prague Linguistic Circle*.[3] I explore how the text triggers and maintains particular aesthetic experience through sentence structure, narration, plot, and specific metaphors but also pace, rhythm, and the phonetic aspects of the text. Third, to strengthen the aesthetic does not mean to reject the social. Literary communication varies and shifts between different reading publics and periods. Therefore, I confront the aesthetic structure of the text with the evolving socio-historical background of its production and its reception in the sense of the hermeneutic circle. The goal of the hermeneutic dialogue between the literary work and its social milieu is to grasp the social knowledge mediated by literature in a comprehensive and historically situated way. When the interpretive potential is exhausted, the result is a contextually rich but also explanatorily powerful social knowledge about the inquired social phenomena as well as various ways these phenomena were codified, communicated, and understood.

A substantial part of the model is the discussion of the "iconic turn" in cultural sociology (Alexander 2015; Alexander et al. 2012; Bartmanski 2016) and its possible benefits when sociologically approaching the aesthetic dimensions of a literary text—i.e., the aesthetic/iconic experience in the reading process. Thanks to the "iconic augmentation" (Ricoeur 1976, p. 40) and "iconic condensation" (Bartmanski 2016, p. 542), literary fiction can capture "sensuous" and "existential" (Harrington

[2] Perhaps paradoxically, Latour brought the idea of "non-human actors" as a basis for the Actor-Network Theory from literary science. Now is the time for this concept to return where it once originated.

[3] Founded in 1926, the *Prague Linguistic Circle* was an association of linguists theoretically based on, and critically reflecting upon, Saussurean structuralism and Russian formalism.



2004, p. 207) aspects of social life and posit them into a “bigger picture” of the whole societies that is often called *Zeitgeist*.

I claim that we can make literature “stronger” in the sociological analysis *because* we interpret it in its meaningful surroundings, not *despite* that. The contextually rich interpretation of a literary text—as in the sense of Geertzian thick description (Reed 2011, pp. 89–121; cf. Alexander and Smith 2003, p. 13)—allows for understanding how literature both *captures* and *communicates* social knowledge.

In the empirical part, I demonstrate my model by analyzing the Czech novel *Bliss was it in Bohemia* by Michal Viewegh (2015 [1992]). Particularly, I investigate how the novel mediates social knowledge of *continuity and discontinuity* of the year 1989 in Czechoslovakia through the iconic experience of reading. In the historical as well as public discourse in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, the era after 1989 has been depicted as an ideological anti-thesis of the *normalization*[4] (Buden 2013, p. 42). For the post-Soviet “grand narratives,” it has been important to clearly define the old regime as evil, regressive, and evolutionary lower than the new one. Often, the communist epoch is narrated as a deviation, or anomaly, in the otherwise progressive pathway of Czechoslovak history towards democracy and humanism (Holý 2010, pp. 86–87, 123). This reductionism of the “binary socialism” (Yurchak 2006, pp. 4–8) has been recently contested by studies highlighting the continuity of everyday life over the grand narrative of the historical discontinuity. In the Czech historiography, Michal Pullmann (2011, p. 13) inspected the discourse of Czechoslovak perestroika,[5] seeking the roots of continuity between the regimes, which “have much more in common than the demonstrators of 1989 would imagine.” Communist societies are framed as a part of the larger (post-)modern Western development (Kolář and Pullmann 2016; Sommer et al. 2019). This research goes in line with a recent set of studies exploring the historical continuity of European post-communism through the concepts of “legacy” (Kotkin and Beissinger 2014), “contextual holism” (Kubik 2013), and “vernacular memories” (Hilmar 2021).

Unlike these approaches, I am not interested in stressing either continuity or discontinuity of the historical experience. Instead, I employ the iconic experience of reading as a key methodological feature to grasp the *ambivalence*—the permanent and dynamic interplay between dis/continuities, which is expressed through routinized, inconsistent, and even contradictory practices of everyday life during normalization. I follow the proposition of James Krapfl (2013, p. 2), who focuses on the recent “cultural history … from below, foregrounding the experiences of the citizens of Czechoslovakia.” Unlike the historical and social scientific analyses, however,

[4] The so-called normalization in Czechoslovakia refers to a period between the *Warsaw Pact* invasion in August 1968 and the *Velvet Revolution* in 1989. The term originally comes from the official document published by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia reporting on the events of Prague Spring and the post-1968 as “consolidation” and “normalization” (ÚV KSČ 1970, pp. 127, 135) as of returning the country to the “normal” state of issues before 1968. In the non-official discourse, the expression was often understood in an ironic way, pointing out that “[n]ormalization was anything but normal” (Vaněk and Mücke 2016, p. 12).

[5] Meaning reconstruction, this term promoted by the Communist Party’s General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev refers to the political reformation taking place in the Eastern Bloc in the 1980s.

Bliss was it in Bohemia allows for capturing the people's experiences in the sense of "totality" as introduced by Lucien Goldmann (1980): by means of a limited number of textual signs, the novel mediates social life as a meaningful whole through its form. Mapping out the aesthetic structure of the novel, then, is "a way to access a deeper understanding of social phenomena, which is representative of the collective life in a broader socio-historical milieu" (Váňa 2020c, p. 24).

Aesthetic/iconic experience as a source of knowledge

Proposing a "cultural sociology of reading," M. Angélica Thumala Olave (2018, p. 418) conducted a qualitative study with female readers and participated in women's reading groups to "capture why reading matters to people." Interestingly, Thumala Olave is not mainly interested in symbolic structures, codes, and discourses, as is typical for the strong program. Instead, she looks at how "subjective and existential meanings" emerge in the process of reading as a part of the reader's *aesthetic experience* (Thumala Olave 2018, p. 418). Thumala Olave (2018, p. 426) makes an important point when she recognizes reading fiction as inherently social, even when practiced individually. Reading is a source of "the ethical reflection and knowledge about the world" and it is valued by the readers for its "capacity to allow for social mobility, to enhance social connections, and to offer knowledge about the times" (Thumala Olave 2018, p. 426). Through the aesthetic experience, reading connects cognitive and aesthetic to mediate emotions and understanding as two inseparable aspects. The reflection, understanding, and knowledge are not just latently waiting in the text, but they emerge as the reader "engages in active and creative exercise of the imagination" in order to "group together the various components of the text to form a consistent whole" (Thumala Olave 2018, p. 428).

Nevertheless, by "placing the experience and agency of readers at the center of the analysis," Thumala Olave (2018, p. 418) plays down *the active role of the text* that "enchants" the readers and allures them to read. Thumala Olave (2018, pp. 429–435) stresses three main areas of understanding: "self-understanding," "ethical reflection and social bonds," and "self-care," all of which focus primarily on the reader. Reflecting upon the reader's emotional, ethical, and social situation, it seems as if the novels themselves were *meaning-less*—merely passively waiting to be given meaning by their readers. However, it is *the convergence of text and reader*—and not just the reader—that brings literary meaning into existence. Unlike the cultural sociology of reading advocated by Thumala Olave, I strive to reinvigorate and employ the part of the aesthetic experience of reading that is on the textual side of literary communication.

In this regard, Wolfgang Iser (1972, p. 284) speaks about the so-called sentence-thought (*Satzdenken*) as a basic building unit of literary meaning. The sentence-thought operates as an ongoing interplay between the constantly changing "horizon of expectation" (Jauss 1982) of the reader and the dynamic set of language signs and their meaning perceived during reading. The text itself steers the reading by "a repertoire of familiar literary patterns and recurrent literary themes together with allusions to familiar social and historical context" as well as "strategies used to set

the familiar against the unfamiliar" (Iser 1972, p. 293). Consequently, there is a perpetual "oscillation between consistency and 'alien associations,' between involvement" and distance (Iser 1972, p. 291) that incites the aesthetic experience of reading. Iser (1972, pp. 294–295) puts an example from *Ulysses* (Joyce 1992 [1922]) where the character Mr. Bloom holds a cigar simultaneously narrated as if it was a spear. Equating two usually unrelated entities, the narrative technique forces the reader to ask questions about possible meanings of such connection. The text, here, is an active agent in the meaning-making process.

It is impossible to fully describe and categorize literary meaning in scientific language, as there is always something beyond the language that can only be felt. Ricoeur (1976, pp. 45–46) speaks about the "surplus of meaning," which points "beyond the linguistic sign" and opens up the space for "semantic ambiguity." This ambiguity, importantly, can refer to several meanings simultaneously while the "reader is not required to choose among them" (Ricoeur 1976, p. 52). What occurs here is a split of reference into two parts, one of which "cannot be said in a direct descriptive way but only alluded to" (Ricoeur 1976, p. 37). Like in the case of Mr. Bloom's cigar/spear introduced above, there is no rational way to decide the "true" meaning of the reference. As the readers try "to impose a consistent pattern on the text," they might find out that meaning "cannot be formulated at all" (Iser 1972, p. 295). The most flagrant case is a textual device of *ellipsis*, where the literary meaning is constructed by the omission of words. With ellipsis, *the very condition of the meaning is the non-existence of its verbal signification*. The power of literary meaning-making, then, stems from its ability to keep the unresolved ambiguity as an inherent part of the meaning. The surplus of meaning, which is "the residue of the literal interpretation" (Ricoeur 1976, p. 55), is not an unnecessary noise to be cut off by rigid analytical categories. Just the opposite, the surplus of meaning is the very center around which the literary understanding forms and circulates.

Cultural sociology deals with the aesthetic experience through the concept of iconicity. The so-called iconic turn in cultural sociology marks an effort of the strong program "to connect the experience of cultural texts … with structures of aesthetic sensibility" (Alexander 2015, p. 3). We can understand iconic experience as analogous to aesthetic experience, which brings literary understanding as an indivisible amalgam of cognitive and aesthetic aspects.[6] Within the original conception of iconic experience, Alexander (2008a, b) conceives these parts as a dichotomy: As the reader approaches the *aesthetic surface*—words, sentences, and paragraphs combined in a certain style and artistic form—the text opens access to its *discursive depth*—condensed meaning encoded within the text that can be mediated only through the iconic experience. My research model, however, is established on a proposition that is not entirely coherent with one of the cornerstones of the original strong program, and that is the *arbitrariness of the sign* based on Saussurean (2011 [1916]) structuralism. To make cultural meanings "autonomous," the strong

[6] Whereas Iser (1972) refers to the "aesthetic experience" only in relation to the experience of reading, Alexander (2008b) understands "iconic experience" as a sensuous experience of any aesthetic surface. Thus, I conceive the aesthetic experience as a subset of iconic experience.

program asserts that "meanings are arbitrary and are generated from within the sign system" (Alexander and Smith 2003, pp. 23–24). The iconic turn as proposed by Alexander (2008a, p. 783) follows the arbitrariness argument that "[p]ure sound is only a signified; its meaning is determined by internally organized signifiers, self-regulating relations of concepts"—i.e., the relation between a sensuous experience (e.g., sound) as a signifier and cultural meaning signified by this experience is arbitrary.[7]

Interestingly, in his article on iconic consciousness, Alexander (2008a) connects in a single paragraph ideas of Saussure and the chief critic of Saussure's dichotomies, linguist, and member of the *Prague Linguistic Circle* Roman Jakobson. On the one hand, Alexander (2008a, p. 783) contends that "Saussure rightly insisted that the sound of language, in itself, carries no meaning," on the other hand, he believes that "[t]he science that Jacobson called poetics concerns the internal sounds and rhythms of speaking and hearing, and how they affect the construal of meaning." Alexander's invocation of Jakobson's theory on poetics, nevertheless, is only partial. In fact, Jakobson dedicated a large portion of his scholarly endeavor to argue that the relation between phonemes and language signs is not arbitrary but "motivated" by "a factual similarity relation between *signans* and *signatum*" (Waugh 1980, p. 71). This similarity is iconic[8] in the Peircean sense, i.e., based on the perception of the signifier's sensuous quality (the aesthetic surface in Alexander's sense). The argument of similarity lies in the core of Jakobson's well-acclaimed concept of *poetic function*. Jakobson shows that people make decisions about the structure of their utterances based on their similar aesthetic qualities.[9] On a famous example of the political slogan "I like Ike,"[10] Jakobson (1960, p. 357) further demonstrates how aesthetic devices such as rhyme, paronomasia, and alliteration take part in the meaning-making. Although the slogan refers to a political campaign, the mediated meaning comes from the sound of the words themselves rather than the extra-textual references.

[7] For Alexander (2015, p. 5), the claim that "surface and depth combine arbitrarily" is also of high political and ideological importance as it supports the idea of the "emancipating power of culture" (Alexander 2011, p. 92). "The conflation of surface and depth is … dangerous" because iconicity "makes meaning seem natural, as if it grows out of appearance, as if the meaning can only be that appearance" (Alexander 2015, p. 5). Admitting that surface and depth were not connected arbitrarily would make ideological space for conservative and essentialist thinking.

[8] To be precise, Jakobson also introduced the so-called artifice, which stands for "imputed similarity" (Waugh 1980, p. 71): non-arbitrary connections between parallelisms, repetitions, and equivalencies, which are made "artificially"—typically in poetry.

[9] "'Why do you always say *Joan* and *Margery*, yet never *Margery* and *Joan*? Do you prefer Joan to her twin sister?' 'Not at all, it just sounds smoother.'" The "smooth sound," explains Jakobson (1960, p. 357), comes from the fact that "the precedence of the shorter names suits the speaker … as a well-ordered shape of the message." Another example is a word choice: We say "horrible Harry"—and "not dreadful, terrible, frightful, disgusting"—because of the poetic device of paronomasia, that is, a grouping of words that sound similar but have different meanings (Jakobson 1960, p. 357).

[10] A well-known linguistic example comes from the 1951 political campaign of Dwight Eisenhower, playing a pun on his nickname. The success of using this linguistic principle was repeated in a 1992 popular commercial "Be Like Mike" featuring American basketball player Michael Jordan.

The case here is not to decide which part of the binary surface/depth (Alexander 2008a) is more significant for attributing the meaning but rather to dismiss the dichotomy in the first place. The text in literary fiction does not merely *represent* the extra-textual world and its deeper symbolic logic. Authors who write a piece of literary fiction have only a limited number of textual signs and aesthetic devices at their disposal to account for the unlimited stream of their lived experience. They necessarily employ what Ricoeur (1976, p. 40) calls an "iconic augmentation," that is, they use iconic condensation "to resist the entropic tendency of ordinary vision and to increase the meaning … by capturing it in the network of its abbreviated signs." Jakobson (1960, pp. 368–370) shows this by applying the principle of "parallelism," which stands for entanglement of textual entities—words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, etc., up to the whole of the book—based on their phonetic and semantic attributes. The field of possible links among intra-, inter-, and extra-textual entities is hypothetically infinite, yet it is by no means arbitrary. Literary texts enforce their agency through "iconic *affordances*" (Bartmanski 2016, p. 547) that direct the reader through the aesthetic/iconic experience of reading. In this regard, Binder (2018, pp. 404–405) brings forth Peirce's idea that "[i]cons 'excite' their interpretants via resemblance to their objects; and even the meaning of symbols is partially 'determined' by the objects to which they refer" (cf. Peirce 1998 [1908], p. 478).[11] Even though following Saussurean legacy has proven itself immensely fruitful when investigating "code, narrative, performance, and so forth" (Alexander and Smith 2010, p. 16), it falls short when it comes to acknowledging "concrete entanglements themselves, without reducing them to analytically distinct components" (Bartmanski 2016, p. 550).

Aesthetic structure as a methodological framework

Leaving the arbitrariness argument and Saussurean structuralism behind does not mean to resign in an effort to provide an explanatorily powerful model. The structural aesthetics of the *Prague Linguistic Circle* (PLC) (Mukařovský 1978; Jakobson 1960) serves as a mediating layer between the iconic experience of reading and its social surrounding. Unlike Saussure and Russian Formalists who focused on ahistorical—synchronic—aspects of language,[12] PLC understands poetics as historically and socially grounded. The structural analysis explores how particular aesthetic devices refer to the extra- and intra-textual entities involved in the iconic experience of reading. How can *the aesthetic structure of a novel* help us to access the social knowledge mediated by the iconic experience of reading?

[11] Binder (2018, p. 404) understands Peirceian "interpretants" as the "act of articulation" that stands for an "idea produced in the mind" by the Saussurean signifier.

[12] Saussure was concerned with the langue/parole interaction in the present moment. Russian Formalists studied literary works as separate from their socio-historical background.

Socio-historical background of production
Author
Writing & production process
Iconic augmentation
Socio-historical background of the text‘s career
Text
Reader‘s socio-historical background
Reader
Immersion
Iconic experience of reading
Social knowledge

Fig. 1 Social knowledge mediated by the iconic experience of reading

When immersing readers, literary fiction ceases to be a mere codification of the author's experience. Through iconic augmentation, the novel mediates social knowledge about various social, cultural, and aesthetic norms, moral and ethical paradigms but also conceptions of bodily perception, sexuality, etc. The text draws the reader into a cognitive and emotional dialogue with the socio-historical background of its creation and various socio-historical backgrounds of its reception (see the double arrow in Fig. 1). By enticing the reader, the aesthetic textual devices channel these backgrounds in iconic experience, thus becoming *iconic of social phenomena*. That is when reading the novel becomes "iconic in its grasp of an entire social order" (Nisbet 1962, p. 72).

Socio-historical backgrounds of:

***production** (authors, publishers, gatekeeprs, etc.)*

***text's career** (circulation among diverse interpretive communities, translations, intertextual citations, etc., evolving in time)*

***reception** (the reader)*

The text's meaningful surroundings

Aesthetic devices inside the text

Hermeneutic interpretation

Aesthetic structure of the text

Iconic social knowledge

Fig. 2 The aesthetic structure of the text

The overall purpose of my model is to *make explicit* this implicit social knowledge mediated by the iconic experience of reading. Because we cannot access it directly through various readers' reading experience, we need to extrapolate the iconic social knowledge from the interaction between the text and its meaningful surroundings. Such a process requires two steps. First, the investigator conducts a formal analysis of the text focusing on the aesthetic devices and their role in conjuring the text's meaning, as in Jakobson's example in the previous section. Second, the investigator relates the meaning-making to the socio-historical backgrounds involved in the reading, that is, the socio-historical background of the text's production, the text's career[13] outside of its production, and the socio-historical backgrounds of respective interpretive communities. The investigator further sensitizes

[13] Literary texts achieve independent "career outside its original context of production" (Santana-Acuña 2014, p. 98). This adds an important diachronic aspect to the interpretation of the text. Diverse interpretations influence each other between various interpretive communities.

this insight through the hermeneutic circle wherein the first and the second step repeatedly inform and navigate each other (cf. Harrington 2002, p. 56). We end up with a tentative (never fully completed) description of dynamic meaning-making relations, i.e., the aesthetic structure (see Fig. 2).

The model strives for a contextually rich interpretation that "thickly describe[s]" (Reed 2011, p. 17) various connections between formal analysis of the text, its extra-textual referents—concrete socio-historical realities—and the ways they coalesce into the complex, ambiguous, and often counter-intuitive meanings. Here, it is instructive to recall the idea of explanation as interpretation (Reed 2011, pp. 123–162; cf. Ricoeur 1981, pp. 91–156). Such an analytical approach involves a "double reading" in the sense of Reed and Alexander (2009, p. 33). Structural aesthetics, via studying aesthetic devices vis-à-vis their meaningful surroundings, enables us to *read* how the readers potentially *read* the concerned texts. Through the aesthetic structure, we can simulate the iconic experience of reading and identify the iconic social knowledge *without translating it into social scientific discourse*.

Following the example of Mukařovský (1971), I claim that the necessary part of my model is its demonstration via empirical cases. In the following sections, I demonstrate how sociologists can enter a dialogue with a novel to acquire genuine social knowledge. First, I outline the aesthetic structure of *Bliss was it in Bohemia* through my reading navigated by the public and scholarly discourse about the novel (literary critiques, radio debates, readers' comments, social media discussions, etc.) as well as an inquiry into the novel's production (interviews with the author and the publisher, biographical information, etc.). Second, I confront the aesthetic structure with the socio-historical background it refers to, which I access through the historical and social scientific accounts of the normalization era. This allows me to identify two main characteristics of the novel's aesthetic structure: Focus on the ambivalence of daily life; and formal experimentation combining realistic and linear narration with flashbacks, introspections, varying perspectives of the narrator, and most of all—alternating and mixing up various genres such as irony, drama, comedy, tragedy, and satire. Both features operate as aesthetic mediators through which the author's experience of normalization is encoded within the text in the form of iconic condensation and consequently invoked as an iconic experience of reading. Only thanks to these aesthetic mediators, the novel can provide *social knowledge, which is iconic of* what I call *the poetics of the late socialism in Czechoslovakia*. That is, the indeterminate, interactional, and emotional aspects of everyday social experience, which tend to fall through the filter of social scientific discourse.

My analysis of the novel is divided into three sections according to the three "iconic moments" representing significant and often disputed topics of Czechoslovak normalization. Each section includes short excerpts from the novel showing how the specific aesthetic devices allow for iconic condensation of these iconic moments. Beginning with Václav Havel's (1978) famous figure of the greengrocer, the first section deals with the analytical reductionism of popular binaries used to understand late socialism. The second section offers a way to understand "social semiotics" of normalization as a form of Baudrillardian hyperreality (Yurchak 2006, p. 77)—a seemingly chaotic and unpredictable socio-cultural system in which the *poetic function* dominates over *referential function* (Jakobson 1960, p. 357). The third section

probes the moral and ethical intricacies of confronting abstract ideals such as "living within the truth" (Havel 1978, p. 73) with practical issues of day-to-day encounters. Before diving into the actual text, I will briefly introduce *Bliss Was It in Bohemia* and the reasons why sociologists should be interested in social knowledge mediated by this novel.

Bliss was it in Bohemia by Michal Viewegh

Born in 1962, Michal Viewegh is one of the authors who were socialized during normalization and spent most of their adult life in a democratic society. A son of university-educated parents, Viewegh studied the Czech language and pedagogy at the Charles University in Prague to become an elementary school teacher. Already in the early 1980s, Viewegh was offering his short stories to literary magazines and publishers. In 1991 in the literary review *Tvar*, Viewegh (1991) published an advertisement looking for a publisher for his book with a tentative title "Kvido's family: melancholic grotesque." He tried to attract publishers by the following text: "A humoristic novel about a slight rise and not too sharp fall a common Czech family in the last thirty years. A tragicomic story of people who live—just like all of us, in a metaphorical sense—in the neighborhood of a famous dissident and who hypochondriacally create bigger troubles than they have. 220 pages." A year later, the book was published with unprecedented success, having sold over 200,000 copies. It also received exceptionally positive reviews and earned Viewegh the prestigious *Jiří Orten Award* for young Czech authors, thus granting him a prominent place in the Czech literary canon. Since then, Viewegh became "the most widely read Czech author"[14] (Fialová 2018) and one of those very few Czech authors who could make a living only by writing fiction.[15] Overall, he wrote 30 books[16] translated into 23 languages, of which about 2 million copies were sold in the Czech Republic alone.[17] The *Encyclopedia of Czech literature* labels Viewegh as one of "the [three] most significant talents of the post-November literature" (Gilk 2015, p. 144).

The novel's main storyline follows a traditional linear narration chronologically organized into seventeen chapters and an epilogue. The general narrative structure is defined by the two historical milestones of the *Prague Spring* and the *Velvet Revolution*, focusing on the main character Kvido and his parents. The story's central driving force is a perpetually emerging conflict between the family and social conditions established in Czechoslovakia after 1968. Two primary features ensured the novel such an extraordinary reception: an effort to narrate the everyday life of a "common

[14] In 2002, around 200,000 copies per every published book by Viewegh were sold on average (Ciglerová and Viewegh 2002).

[15] Even authors who sell tens of thousands of copies of their novels must keep their other job (Hartman 2012).

[16] Seventeen novels, six collections of short stories, three autobiographical books, two collections of newspaper columns, and two collections of literary parodies.

[17] On the Czech book market, titles exceeding 10,000 sold copies are considered bestsellers. Very few of the most successful books cross the line of 100,000 sold copies.

Czech family" focusing on ambivalence rather than the naïve anti-communism (Balaštík 2011; Fialová 2018; Schindler 2002); and formal experimentation elaborating on the "middle-brow" aesthetic style, which appealed to "high-brow" literary gatekeepers as well as those who prefer leisure reading (Lukeš 2001; Trávníček 2009). The post-1989 Czech literature either rejected the position of authority[18]—often through adopting post-modernism and withdrawal to the sphere of privacy and psychologization (Chitnis 2005)—or followed the 1989's "myth of origin" with its black-and-white anti-communist rhetoric (cf. Noordenbos 2016, pp. 6–25). The nationwide anti-communism established a universally accepted belief that communism is inherently ideological while democracy based on a free-market economy and capitalism is "value-free," and therefore "ideology-free" (Kolář and Pullmann 2016). Most Czech authors after 1989 "despised all ideologies" (Balaštík 2011), which led them to uncritically embrace the grand narrative of the historical discontinuity. Avoiding naïve anti-communism and capturing the ambiguous textures of daily life allowed Viewegh to mediate the experience resonating with a broad spectrum of readers, who were neither dissidents nor active proponents of the regime but something in-between. "[H]is characters make a trade-off with the totalitarian regime, but he does not judge them; he merely shows that everything is more complex than how it looks on the surface" (Schindler 2002). Most of the reviewers highlighted that "there is no pretension against the previous regime and no political moralizing" (Knapp and Chuchma 2005) because "the author looks at the recent history without diabolizing or mythologizing it" (Karfík 1993).

The key to the novel's overall success is its multilayered aesthetic structure employing an abundance of connections between various intra- and extra-textual entities and cultural artifacts. Viewegh approaches post-communist memory as *ruins* in the sense of David Williams (2013)—an indefinite mixture of emotions and aesthetic qualities spanning between melancholia and nostalgia, romanticism and cynicism, as well as the lust for freedom and skepticism towards the "Western" way of life. Importantly, the highly aestheticized postmodern form and genre experimentation allow for expressing the late socialist experience as inherently ambivalent and polysemic, accepting all the contradictions as potentialities with open meaning rather than trying to resolve them (Williams 2013, p. 14). The ambivalence of social life during normalization is already condensed in the Czech title of the book *Báječná léta pod psa*,[19] sometimes translated as *Blissful Years of Lousy Living* and *Those Wonderful Years that Sucked.*[20] Through the aesthetic, the novel makes the reader experience this polysemy with all its unsettling, unnerving but also ironic nature. That is why *Bliss was it in Bohemia* was unanimously acclaimed "as the voice of a generation" (Pehe 2020, p. 49), which "brilliantly and with a wit depicted mingling

[18] In the Czech literary sphere during communism, this idea was epitomized in conceiving the author as "conscience of the nation"; i.e., someone who provides the reader with a moral and ethical compass (Wachtel 2006, pp. 14–43).

[19] British translator of the novel David Short (2015, p. x) says that translating the title was a "HUGE problem," so he finally resorted to paraphrasing Wordsworth's poem "The French Revolution." Even though the British title has a poetic quality, it does not, however, capture the original meaning.

[20] This title was used for a popular movie based on the novel.

of the ‘big’ and ‘small’ history” (Schindler 2002). As a compelling case study of the post-communist “ruins,” it became *iconic* of the ambiguous social experience before 1989 and the post-socialist remembering of this experience.

The poetics of the late socialism

“All that red is just protective coloration”: negotiation with the regime

In his seminal piece *The Power of the Powerless*, Václav Havel (1978) coined the term “post-totalitarian” to distinguish the political system of 1970s socialism in Czechoslovakia from the traditional conception of dictatorship. The post-totalitarian ideology, claims Havel, was embodied in daily routines and rituals, so the widespread support of the political system to a great extent relied on the citizens’ desire to simply cope with their daily lives. Havel’s famous figure of the greengrocer, who displays the slogan “Workers of the world, unite!”[21] in the window of his corner store, is not a passionate supporter of the international communist movement. According to Havel, the greengrocer declares an utmost desire to live a calm life undisturbed by any political agenda. The ideology in a post-totalitarian system manifests itself through a “complex machinery of units, hierarchies, transmission belts, and indirect instruments of manipulation which ensure in countless ways the integrity of the regime” (Havel 1978, p. 8). This ideology needs to be accepted and excused by the citizens and integrated into their lifeworld on a daily basis. In the following paragraph, Kvido’s father ponders upon a similar idea during one of the numerous kitchen talks with his wife:

> That’s the nature of the times. ‘They’ are our competitors—and with competitors you have to employ tactics, otherwise it’s just tilting at windmills. An animal survives by merging with its environment. All that red is just protective coloration. (BB 55–56)[22]

The scene is preceded by Kvido’s mother encouraging the father to visit Šperk, one of the high-ranking communists in his work. She justifies the suggestion by referring to the father’s colleague and friend Zvára, who has been recently given a decent flat, even though he and his wife have only one baby, not two like Kvido’s parents. Although the father uses the quixotic analogy (“tilting at windmills”) to excuse Zvára’s loyalty to Šperk, he himself is not capable of “merging with the environment.” In the dialogue between parents, there occurs a shift of meaning regarding Zvára’s behavior. It starts with surprise and tabooization, implicitly indicating condemnation of Zvára’s visit to Šperk as an expression of loyalty with the regime. However, when such behavior is related to the material benefits (getting the flat) for

[21] A more precise translation of the Czech original would be “Proletarians of all countries, unite!”, which is also more in line with the German original of the *Communist Manifesto*: “Proletarier aller Länder, vereinigt euch!”.

[22] Henceforth, the acronym “BB” refers to Viewegh (2015 [1992]).

Zvára's family, it is reframed as a "tactic." The act of betrayal suddenly becomes an act of cunning "self-preservation" and the loyalty with the regime is "just protective coloration" (cf. "preference falsification" in Kuran 1995, p. 15). Joining the Communist Party was generally perceived as an utmost expression of loyalty.[23] Besides that, the space to demonstrate loyalty was unclear and ambiguous and kept people in a permanent state of alertness. In the sphere of everyday life, such negotiation was held in order to secure basic needs and maintain some degree of family and individual well-being.

Then, the mother continues ranting: "And you're not doing anything about it! How on earth am I supposed to respect you?" (BB 57). In the family dispute, diverse values contest each other, so that finally, the preference shifts from the private subversion against the Party to the value of family well-being and its securing in the practical sense. As an iconic experience, this scene relates to one of the most controversial themes in the ongoing debate on the Czech post-communist memory, and that is *the negotiation with the communist regime*.[24] Havel developed the greengrocer metaphor into his famous concept of "living within the truth" (Havel 1978, p. 18) as opposed to life in lie and hypocrisy.[25] The logic of "double life," where citizens publicly perform their acts in contradiction to their private opinions, should have served as a corrective to the simplistic explanation of totalitarian ideology as a straightforward indoctrination of a citizen's life in its totality. However, the danger of methodological reductionism is that the complex, ambiguous, and highly messy process of legitimization and negotiation in daily life is reduced to a dichotomy between a few dissidents—those "living within the truth"—and the passive general society (Klíčová 2018, p. 11).[26]

The depiction of the family dispute is followed by a scene describing the father's visit to Šperk's office:

> 'You haven't registered for an evening course in Marxism-Leninism, you don't attend meetings, you hold no official positions, you simply don't show any kind of *commitment*!'
>
> Kvido's father just shrugged.
>
> 'I'm not asking for miracles, Comrade,' said Šperk. 'It would be enough if you joined the National Front. How about the volunteer fire brigade?' (BB 69)

[23] Out of 15 million citizens of Czechoslovakia, some 2 million were members of the Party.

[24] This thesis is based on the idea that the Communist Party did not have "total" control over the citizens, thus leaving some maneuvering space for people's agency (Blaive 2017; Kolář and Pullmann 2016).

[25] Originally in Russian "zhit' ne po lzhi," the term was coined by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in 1974.

[26] The notion of "living within the truth," as vocally advocated by Havel, earned a prominent position among Czech dissidents. Most significantly, the idea was disseminated through unofficial (or "underground") philosophy seminars promoting the phenomenology of philosopher Jan Patočka. The existentialist narrative, however, has a long history reaching back to the fifteenth century when the myth of Jan Hus has been established as a symbol of national martyrdom.

In practical terms, the negotiation with the regime occurred between private and public: to reach scarce resources such as a fulfilling job or housing, one had to manifest loyalty to the "sociality of the so-called normal people" for which Alexei Yurchak (2006, pp. 108–114) uses the Russian term "svoi." "I've decided … that *we* should give you one more chance" (BB 67, emphasis mine) says Šperk. Loyalty to the Party is linguistically normalized through personal pronouns "us" and "we," which do not operate as a usual constructor of the *us-vs-them* polarity. In the shared space of the "Comradery," everybody is a "Comrade." Belonging to the community of "svoi" is based on the tacit knowledge of "how things are." Rather than "living a lie" (Havel 1978, pp. 18–20), the majority of citizens, similar to Kvido's parents, was oscillating somewhere between the truth-lie polarization—in the "gray zone" (Šiklová 2004 [1990]), or "second society" (Machonin 2005). They did neither openly support the regime nor stood up against it. The ritualistic discourse and performances were adopted as a "protective coloration" (BB 55–56) by which citizens simply demonstrated their belonging among "normal people"—those who want to live decent lives, have a decent job, and most of all, want to have peace for their private activities that are typically related to the family.

In the end, Šperk does not lend Kvido's father the key from the promised flat but keys from a whole house with a big garden. He takes the keys from his desk drawer and throws them at Kvido's father right away. Kvido's father must promise he will register for the evening course in Marxism-Leninism.

> 'And one more thing,' he [Šperk] said to Kvido's father finally, 'You'll be needing a dog—now you've got a garden. … I'll sell you a puppy. … Complete with full documentation. I breed them. Did you know?'
>
> 'Yes, but I —'
>
> 'Three thousand crowns. Stop by one time.'
>
> 'Can't be done,' Kvido's father tried to protest. 'I don't mean the money, but it would drive my wife mad. She's terrified of dogs.'
>
> 'She'll get used to it,' said Šperk. 'Mine did. …' (BB 70–71)[27]

Šperk's jovial but also paternalistic tone represents a *parent–child relationship* of the Party to Czechoslovak citizens. Šperk makes it clear that he is the one to decide about the living conditions of Kvido's family. Yet, at the same time, Kvido's father can influence Šperk's decision if he acts accordingly. In the first place, Kvido's father was expected to recognize the social norms of "acting accordingly" by himself. As he did not, the family was penalized by demeaning living conditions. Now Šperk gives Kvido's father a "second chance," making the norms of expected behavior more explicit. Also, by showing a "good will" of a patronizing parent, Šperk makes Kvido's father indebted in the sense of the "economy of gift," as described by Možný (2009 [1991], pp. 68–70). The whole transaction is camouflaged as an

[27] All the ellipses (three dots) in quotations are mine. They are not part of the aesthetic devices used in the original text.

expression of disinterested affection, even though the receiver of the gift (the flat) is unspokenly expected to give something back (to manifest loyalty). Importantly, the value of the gift is never clearly defined, so it is never quite clear whether the debt has been paid off or not. This obscurity inaugurates a long-term relationship in which both sides try to balance the approximate height of their mutual debts. Šperk discreetly suggests that if Kvido's father wants to keep the gift, he should accept it with a dog. As if by accident, Šperk is a dog vendor, so, in the end, buying a dog is implied as Kvido's father's "gift" in return for Šperk's "generosity."

Possible frictions in the interaction are prevented by the generally accepted script of performance. The potential moral burden Kvido's father might experience is transferred to the sphere of pretending rather than believing. It does not matter whether he exclaims the utterance "Comrade" sincerely—whether he truly believes in the "comradeship." By acting "accordingly," Kvido's father reproduces the authoritative discourse of the Communist Party regardless of what he truly thinks. That allows him to cherish his inner beliefs in privacy so they do not manifestly contravene the performance. The introduced scenes operate as icons of the obscure—but also somehow smoothly running—system of gift economy of the early 1970s, as witnessed through the ritualized actions and performative dimension of language. The aesthetic dimensions of the text allow for channeling the openness and indeterminacy of the "negotiation" with the regime. Also, through the iconic experience of reading, the aesthetic dimensions can mediate the emotionally loaded moral ambivalence that stems from the discrepancy between the scripted performance (the formally accepted behavior) and subjective perception of such performance (hesitation, confusion, guilt, etc.).

"All I want is to land a decent job": social semiotics of hypernormalization

The key methodological feature of studying normalization through a novel is the idea of the inherent ambiguity of language, which *allows social actors to be inconsistent and even self-contradictory but also meaningful at the same time*. As Yurchak (2006, p. 22) suggests, there is no essential personal attitude "behind the mask," but the persons are performatively co-constituted by their acts, including speech acts. This claim has a significant impact on the interpretation of everyday life during the late socialism in Czechoslovakia. A vast proportion of politically motivated actions and proclamations were devoid of informational value—the *constative dimension*—yet they were reproducing the authoritative discourse *on a performative level*. For example, participation in parliamentary elections did not express any opinion about the candidates or the Communist Party. However, its performative dimension confirmed the legitimacy of the authoritative discourse.[28] In the following scene, we can see a sharp contradiction between the performative and constative dimensions of Kvido's father's decision to buy Šperk's puppy. The performative dimension of making a deal with Šperk earns material benefits for the family. Simultaneously, the

[28] Because there was a single ballot, the elections were not a matter of political choice but a manifestation of supporting the Party.

constative dimension as the dog's actual presence in the family is a source of conflict and moral burden.

> 'So it's only you who wants a dog in the house!'
>
> 'I don't, though,' her husband tried to disabuse her. 'All I want is to land a decent job.'
>
> '… So actually no one wants one—and yet we're to have one?? And so you're going to bring one home, tomorrow?? Why??'
>
> 'That's what I've been trying to explain: so I can do my proper job.'
>
> 'And for that you have to buy a hairy work permit from Šperk for three thousand crowns!'
>
> 'Oh, my dear God!' he wailed. 'It's not as if I can help it!' (BB 85)

Owning the dog operates as a *performance of the Party's presence* in the family's everyday life in both senses of the expression: first, it is a performative act of reproducing authoritative discourse through the family's loyalty to Šperk; and second, taking care of the dog is a high-performance activity, which the family needs to keep up in order not to lose the benefits earned from the barter. The discrepancy between the constative and performative dimensions is further stressed by the original dog's name "Něha" literally meaning *tenderness*.[29] The connection between a real word reference (the dog) and its verbal representation (tenderness) here is purely symbolic in the Peircean sense: even though the father tries to persuade the mother that the dog's name expresses its cuddliness and soft fur, the "wild, stubborn and extremely disobedient" (BB 89) German Shepherd does not seem to bear any attributes of its name. "Like stroking a dead rat" (BB 89), says Kvido's mother in disgust, debating why Něha should stay with the family in the first place.

Another example of the tension between performative and constative dimensions of behavior is Kvido's recitation. As a precocious child who trained his rhetorical skills alongside famous Czechoslovak actors,[30] Kvido makes a great impression at the meeting of the local communist organization. Accidentally, Kvido, who sees "little sense" in the revolutionary verse, concentrates his effort on the performative dimension of language, thus articulating meaning-less poems with the most sincere passion. The meaning, in the end, is not delivered by the content of the poems but by their performative effect. Kvido's recitation is performatively effective on two levels: First, despite the lack of the poems' meaning, it is an authentic experience of a child who integrates it into his meaningful lifeworld and makes it a part of his biography (Kvido perceives it as a great success); second, this experience becomes formally (from Kvido's perspective unintentionally) an expression and a reproduction of the authoritative discourse. The performative dimension of the authoritative discourse feeds upon anyone who can fill it with "authentic" content. Reciprocally,

[29] Due to its phonetic features, the English translation "Sweetie" captures this meaning only partially.

[30] Before 1968, Kvido's mother used to work as an actor in the National Theater.

the performer is rewarded by social recognition and prestige. In this case, Kvido's performance is rewarded by his father's promotion.

To describe the widespread presence of the utterly ritualized authoritative language, Yurchak (2006, pp. 74–76) borrows Baudrillard's (1994) term "hyperreality." The so-called hypernormalization stands for a state of affairs in which nor the "authoritative discourse" neither any "competing description of reality" could "provide an accurate constative description of reality," so the reality had no grounding and "became reduced to discursive simulacra" (Yurchak 2006, p. 75). It became relatively unimportant "which statements represented 'facts' and which did not," since "Soviet people engaged with authoritative language at the level of the performative dimension" (Yurchak 2006, p. 76). The performative dimension, which made up for the lack of the constative dimension, created a "hyperreality": a reality where "nothing about the representations of the world was verifiably true or false, the whole of reality became ungrounded" (Yurchak 2006, p. 76).

Later, Kvido comments on his parents' reaction when they find out that he was chosen by the teacher for his reciting skills:

> [I]t suited Father's plans, and so he didn't try to prevent it—and that's the very word for it, they simply didn't try to *prevent* me from doing it. … I did their dirty work for them …
>
> It might sound stupid to you, but I'm still convinced that my recitations for the Communists, the purchase of Šperk's dog and my father's playing football were, so to say, the three sources and three conditions of his subsequent short career. (BB 82–83; emphasis original)

Kvido's reflection refers to the gift economy mentioned in the previous section (Možný 2009 [1991]). His manifestation of belonging to the socialist "Comradery" has a positive impact on his family's well-being, just like in the case of Šperk's dog and the father playing the hated football in Šperk's team.[31] Participation in these activities follows the logic of the hypernormalized language, that is: the constative value is substituted by performative—the content is surpassed by the form. In this sense, the "hyperreality" of normalization to a great extent gives precedence to the *poetic function* over the *referential function* as defined by Roman Jakobson (1960, p. 357). The same principle can be applied to the whole socio-cultural system of normalization.[32] In a language system where the poetic function is dominant, such as in poetry, the meaning relies more on the character and combination of the language signs than their reference (Jakobson 1960, pp. 358–359).[33] Similarly, in the semiotics of social life, when the poetic function predominates, it is much more important

[31] Šperk urges Kvido's father to join his football team in order to be "visible" (BB 83) as in the sense of belonging to the socialist community.

[32] For the application of linguistics and semiotics in cultural sociology, see Binder (2018).

[33] According to Jakobson (1960, p. 358), the "empirical linguistic criterion of the poetic function" is that the "poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination." That is, the way *how* words and sentences are combined (syntagmatic relation in linguistics) is more important than *what* words selected to convey the meaning (paradigmatic relation).

how the signifiers operate in the meaning system, rather than *what* is their reference to the lifeworld. If we conceive the recitation and purchasing of a dog as experiential referents or *signifieds* in the social semiotic system, the meaning of these activities is not primarily designated by these referents. Rather, the meaning is primarily rendered by collective representations of these experiences—the *signifiers*—which are coupled with the referents. As a result, *the hypernormalized social semiotics of late socialism* is, to a large extent, self-referential and autonomous in relation to their referents.

However, it is not to say that the relation between referents and signs within the system of social semiotics is arbitrary, football being a cogent example. As a popular collective sport during normalization, football played an important role in structuring time and social activities, especially in small towns. The regular weekend matches could have had a disciplinary function in the Foucauldian sense: whoever participated as a player or a fan was under the surveillance of other community members—not only manifesting allegiance to the collectivity but also establishing an alibi that they were not committing an anti-regime activity.[34] Nevertheless, the connection between an activity and its political/social meaning, as perceived by the actors themselves, was often rather unclear, non-intuitive, and ambiguous. This experience of ambiguity is also the cause of Kvido's father's confusion: he mistakenly attributes meaning to the concrete activities, not recognizing that it is their form—their poetic function—that matters the most. The "recitations for the Communists, the purchase of Šperk's dog and [Kvido's] father's playing football" (BB 83) compose a larger semantic unit. Through this semantic unit, Šperk and other superiors test Kvido's father's will to be "politically visible" and "committed" and therefore deserving a promotion (BB 69). It is in this sense that the hypernormalized social semiotics of late socialism resemble Baudrillardian hyperreality. It is "the map that precedes the territory" (Baudrillard 1994, p. 1): the signs and their arrangements play a leading role in assigning meanings to the events (cf. Yurchak 2006, p. 75). Through the effect of iconic condensation, the excerpts in this section are iconic of this hyperreality as a general condition of the 1970s Czechoslovak normalization.

"Living a Lie," resigning into the truth

On the level of everyday life, the ungrounded hyperreality of normalization was often perceived as "arbitrary" (Świrek and Pospech 2021) in the sense of vast unpredictability, non-transparency, and complexity.[35] In many cases, the indeterminate constative dimension of ritualized acts enabled the actors to endow these acts with new meanings. These were not necessarily subversive as in the case of

[34] Personal consultation with Radim Marada, August 2020.

[35] I am aware of the danger of conceptual confusion between two conceptualizations of "arbitrariness." However, it should be clear that "arbitrariness" as a subjectively perceived quality of life during normalization refers to the phenomenological lifeworld, while "arbitrariness of the sign" stands for a conventional sign system derived from linguistics.

dissidents but allowed for creative interpretation of the authoritative discourse to pursue private goals. As a result, the world of hypernormalization also had a certain, mostly implicit, set of rules which one could try to master and benefit from them. Following these "rules," however, was not equally possible for everyone (unequal access to different sources of capital) and many found it morally disputable, which, according to Swirek and Pospech (2021, p. 141), led to "a sense of shared guilt." For example, Něha's presence in family life is a permanent reminder of the omnipresence of the Party's power, which makes family members succumb to it and brings upon them the burden of moral guilt. The tangible material benefits such as a higher salary and a better living place are outweighed by *permanent and visible evidence of a moral failure* as subjectively perceived by Kvido's parents. Simultaneously, the interactional dynamics allow the actors to delegate the moral burden between each other. The mother repeatedly emphasizes that it was the father who morally failed by bringing the dog—even though it was she who urged the father to bend the knees to raise the family's living standards. Similarly, in Kvido's recitation, the moral burden is delegated to the sphere of the interactional dynamics between Kvido and his teacher. Instead of the active manifestation of loyalty, Kvido's father's action is limited to "not preventing" Kvido from reciting the poems (BB 82).

As already mentioned, to perform loyalty with the socialist collectivity, one has to make a constant effort. Through manifold aesthetic devices, the novel mediates a condensed iconic experience of performing the Comradery as a *high-performance activity*. Once he reached satisfactory well-being for the family, Kvido's father cannot simply stop behaving as a pro-active member of the normalization sociality. The ritualistic discourse must be performed repeatedly and unquestionably. However, the father's idea of a hard-working, self-made man conflicts with the socialist conception of work as a source of collective identity, which during normalization sedimented into ritualized manifestations of belonging to the collectivity and enjoying undisturbed "peace for work" (Kolář and Pullmann 2016, pp. 60–72). Feeling trapped between two "systems of preferences" (Kuran 1995, pp. 3–21), he gets into an argument with Zvára and activates sarcasm as a coping mechanism:

> 'Do you know why it's not you going even though you're better? … Because you're an idiot!'
>
> 'Well I never! Said Kvido's father in a slightly strangled voice, 'and all the time there was silly me thinking it was because I hadn't joined the Communist Party' (BB 94)

After the interaction gets heated, Kvido's father manages to calm down and turns the situation into a joke. Later at home, he gets into a quarrel with his wife:

> 'And you're never once going to tell him,' his wife would badger him, 'exactly what you think of him? … doesn't it worry you that you're *living a lie*?'

> ‘Yes it does,’ said he. ‘But it worries me less than having someone in the office creating a shindig because he’s taken offence. It scares the wits out of me. It brings me out in a rash’
>
> ‘So you *live in a lie* because of a rash.’
>
> ‘And you’re not *living a lie*?’
>
> ‘Of course I am. We all are. Only I try to fight against it’ in my own way, not perhaps very obviously, but I do.’ (BB 95–96; emphasis mine)

Here, the question of moral integrity is brought up through the rhetorical device of irony. The dialogue between parents is an unequivocal reference to Havel’s (1978, p. 18) concept of “living within the truth.” By transferring the concept from an essayistic/intellectual exegesis into satirical fiction, Viewegh inspects the abstract notions of truth and lie in concrete situations of everyday life, most significantly represented by the “kitchen table talks” among Kvido’s mother and father. The most striking difference is shifting Havel’s binary truth-vs-lie to the volatile sphere of ambivalence and interactional dynamics. Havel’s (1978, p. 73) inquiry conceives the existential dimensions of the “post-totalitarian” society primarily as a potential space for “existential revolution” and “political reconstitution of society.” Here, living within the truth becomes a moral maxim completely torn out of the whimsical and obscure social experience. Above all, the existential struggle of Kvido’s parents does not happen as a one-time decision but takes place recurrently, and usually unconsciously, on an everyday basis. Most of the social actions occur in the “extraordinary space in between the opposites … that transcends the successful ordering and splitting of the world into neat binaries” (Giesen 2012, p. 788).

Long-term living in the regime of ambivalence where performative and constative dimensions of actions are in a permanent conflict might lead to the state Yurchak (2006, p. 132) describes as *internal emigration*: “the inherent ambivalence” of “being inside and outside at the same time.” Most notably, *internal emigration* accounts for the “lifestyle, when one is actually quite involved in many activities of the system, but nevertheless remains partial to many of its constative meaning” (Yurchak 2006, p. 133). This ambivalence finds expression in the most mundane activities and micro-situations, such as shopping at the local grocery store, as described in the following scene.

> It happened one Saturday morning while they were shopping at the local department store. … Kvido’s father conceded that she might have first noticed him by the milk crates, be he insisted that Kohout was *facing the crates*—the logical direction to be looking anyway—and therefore with his back to her, so she had plenty of time to turn her trolley round calmly, like someone who’s suddenly realized that they’ve forgotten to get something from an earlier shelf, like—for the sake of argument—oat flakes.” (BB 153–154; emphasis original)

In the paragraph above, a suspenseful description with an ironic undertone precedes an encounter with the “controversial dissident” Pavel Kohout. Introduced as a complex interplay of various motivations, expectations, and social norms, this dramatic

encounter is retrospectively narrated by Kvido as the initial point of the family's tragical decline.

> 'Hi, Pavel,' Kvido's mother had said back then, smiling radiantly at Pavel Kohout, giving the staff, the purchasing public and, last but not least, herself to know that she wasn't afraid to speak to such a controversial dissident in such a busy place.
>
> …
>
> 'Hi!'
>
> Almost at once he checked himself and lapsed into the tone of restrained affability that he had long adopted for meetings of this kind and which had no other purpose that to evince a specific kind of consideration for whoever he was talking to. The radiant smile on Kvido's mother's face showed no sign of fading even after several minutes, so eventually he decided to utter the social cliché that he had rarely uttered of late, well aware that, coming from him, it exposed the addressee to crude psychological pressure.
>
> 'So stop by sometime – when you have a moment,' he said rather guardedly.
>
> …
>
> 'And there it was. The fateful moment,' Kvido told the editor. (BB 155–156)

The spontaneous reaction to seeing a good old friend—the "radiant smiling" of Kvido's mother—is retrospectively reflected as a potential threat, but also as a source of positive personal self-evaluation by overcoming the fear of being spotted "in such a busy place." Kohout, who is at first pleasantly surprised by Kvido's mother's irresistible excitement, quickly "lapses into the tone of restrained affability" in order to create the appearance that they are not, after all, so good friends. The dissident is aware that in the hypernormalized social code, his mere presence functions as *a performance of symbolic pollution*. Interestingly, Kohout's effort not to cause "crude psychological pressure" has two motivations: first, it gives Kvido's mother some maneuvering space, so she can decide whether she is willing to take the risk of becoming polluted herself; and second, if she decides not to take the risk, it can ease the potential guilt she might feel by performing conformism. Further, Kvido reflects on this situation:

> 'If the invite had been in writing, I'm a hundred per cent certain they'd have turned it down,' Kvido asserted. 'They'd have countless arguments to draw on. But the way it was, face to face…' (BB 156–157)

Kvido's parents agreed with Kohout's invitation not because of an inner persuasion to "live within the truth." Quite the contrary, their long-term endeavor was to maintain the "protective coloration" (BB 56) by avoiding activities potentially seen as anti-regime. The sphere of interactional ambivalence, which opened in front of them unexpectedly, became the playing field of uncountable motivations, feelings, and aspirations. Kvido's father even feels a "sharp pricking sensation beneath his

breastbone" (BB 157) as a bodily warning preventing him from further contact. However, the dynamics of the face-to-face interaction result in the family's visit to the dissident's house and consequently lead to a police interrogation. Kvido's father loses his job, and the family members are penalized by a rapid decrease of well-being and social status, which again takes place on a daily basis—through stigmatization and segregation slowly developing into resignation and complete closing off from the world. In the end, the new living conditions make Kvido's parents finally "live within the truth" free from any moral burden caused by negotiation with the regime. However, it seems they have nothing to live for anymore. Due to the text's aesthetic dimensions, we can follow maneuvering between moral, ethical, and practical values in everyday micro-situations and interactional dynamics. The scenes introduced in this section are iconic of the *inherent ambivalence* of such maneuvering. The detailed descriptions are iconic as they "trigge[r] a process of typification" by their "very uniqueness" (Alexander 2008b, p. 6). This typification, however, does not refer only to collective representations and symbolic orders. More importantly, thanks to the iconic experience excited within the reader, the individual descriptions in the novel mediate social knowledge of emotional, tacit, and sensorial dimensions that are iconic of the social life during the 1970s normalization in general.

Implications and prospects

The chief motivation for establishing the strong program in the sociology of literature is to rehabilitate literary fiction in sociological analysis. Following this emancipatory purpose has, however, three significant, and perhaps even more critical, implications for cultural sociology and sociological theory in general. The first deals with *theorizing* as a fundamental activity of any sociological inquiry, the second relates to the textual *representation* of social phenomena, and the third concerns *explanation* as a process of achieving social knowledge. I suggest that to unlock the wealth of social knowledge in literature, the "literary turn" in cultural sociology must reconsider these three fundamentals.

First, the idea to use the aesthetic experience as a basic analytical unit in social theory is far from a new one. Most famously among sociological classics, it is usually attributed to Georg Simmel (1968 [1896]) and his "Soziologische Aesthetik," which "heralds an approach to the social that is attentive to the felt experience of social actors" (Highmore 2012, p. 157). In the last decade, this orientation has been most visibly adopted by the approaches converging under the umbrella of the "social aesthetics" (Born et al. 2017; Highmore 2012; Martin 2011; Martin and Merriman 2016) but also as a basis for "a post-Bourdieuian theory of cultural production" (Born 2010) or even for an "aesthetic conception of culture" per se (Jacobs and Hanrahan 2005, pp. 10–12).[36] These approaches share with Simmel's original

[36] I owe a great deal of gratitude to the anonymous reviewers of my manuscript for their suggestion to discuss social aesthetics, which I find immensely fruitful in comparison to my approach and to Reed's (2011, p. 10) notion of "interpretive epistemic mode."

conception the ambition to redeem the aesthetic from a "narrowly defined sociology of Culture" focusing on cultural products (Martin and Merriman 2016, p. 132) and "extend aesthetic categories to forms of society as a whole" (Simmel 1968 [1896], p. 74, cited in Highmore 2012, p. 157).

Here, the phenomenological imperative of grounding social aesthetics within the actors' everyday experience follows the post-positivist idiom of social theorizing (i.e., creating and using social theories) as a general human ability to make sense of the world (Joas and Knöbl 2009, pp. 1–19). Social theories created by sociologists, just like non-scholarly ones, are heterogeneous assemblages of empirical observations, feelings, correlations, and generalizations (see "epistemological continuum" in Alexander 1982, p. 2) grounded in broader cultural patterns, social conventions, institutional rules, etc. Social theory is more or less useful based on its ability to enhance understanding of a social experience so it simultaneously "makes sense" to a respective interpretive community (Reed 2011, p. 115; Martin 2011, p. 13). That said, it does not "make much sense" to measure the usefulness of social theory encoded in literary fiction by the criteria of social scientific texts, as they follow norms bound to different genres. Just like sociological text, "[f]iction is the selective ordering of experience rendered in a unique story" (Banks 2008, p. 160). To understand it properly, we need to find an appropriate interpretation key.

Second, to decode the implicit social theory in literature, we must understand how it transforms the social experience into a text. The complexities of social aesthetics always appear as a unity to those who experience them (Martin and Merriman 2016, pp. 136–137). Thus, the textual accounts of this aesthetic experience that strive for "phenomenological validity" (Martin 2011, p. 105) must encode the complexity and subtlety as well as unity and generality. Both sociology and literature developed various strategies for how to do it. While, for example, realistic fiction and ethnography proceed through "thick descriptions" (Becker 2007, p. 284), more lyrically oriented texts adopt the way of metaphors and stylistic impressions (Abbott 2007). Many literary and sociological texts have in common their ambition to grasp what Highmore (2012, p. 158) calls "moods and modes of modernity." That is why Goldmann (1980) adopted and de-ontologized György Lukács' term "totality" referring to the spirit of an epoch (or *Zeitgeist*) as a meaningful whole mediated by literary texts. The principle is analogous to the process of "bracketing-out" suggested by Alexander and Smith (2003, p. 56n55) in their strong program manifesto: "[T]he ontological reality of perceived objects is temporarily repressed in order to search for those subjective elements in the actor's intentionality that establish the sense of verisimilitude." Usually, however, both in sociology and literature, it is the combination of thick descriptions and skillful use of "brackets" that creates compelling social knowledge such as in *The Man Without Qualities* by Robert Musil (Harrington 2002), Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (Smith 2004), Clifford Geertz's (1973) "Deep Play," or, returning to social aesthetics, Georgina Born's (2010) sophisticated approach to music production. Even though literature often employs fictional worlds or intentionally disrupts our sense of reality, as a referential system it relates to intersubjectively shared lifeworlds in the same way as social sciences (cf. Pavel 1986, p. 25). The strong program in the sociology of literature offers tools to make this reference more visible, so sociologists can once and for all

abandon the false hierarchy between "real" and "fictional" and treat social theory in literature with due respect (see also Watson 2021, p. 3).

Third, and perhaps most intriguing when it comes to the aesthetic experience and lyrical/aesthetic style of writing—whether we call it social aesthetics (Born et al. 2017; Highmore 2012; Martin 2011), lyrical sociology (Abbott 2007), sociological fiction (Watson 2021), or just literary fiction (Banks 2008)—is the problem of explanation. In social theorizing, there is no mere *representation* of reality, but it is always its *re-presentation*—"re-writing of reality" (Ricoeur 1976, p. 42), which connects the text with a concrete socio-historical milieu while at the same time re-arranging it, re-naming it, adding something new to it (cf. Reed 2011, p. 162).[37] Social aesthetics proposes to base the "verisimilitude" (see Atkinson 1990, pp. 39–42) of such representations on the coherence with the sensorial experience of the social phenomena ("phenomenological validity," Martin 2011, p. 105) rather than the intellectual authority granted by scientific institutions and standardized procedures. For social aesthetics, an interpretation can become an explanation if it informs us beyond the interpreted case (typically answering the "why" question) while remaining "in the same phenomenological world as the actions … explain[ed]" (Martin 2011, p. 336).

The idea of explanation as finding "regularity … in the realm of the concrete" (Martin 2011, p. 344) is coherent with Isaac Reed's (2011, pp. 123–162) conception of explanation via interpreting the meaningful surroundings of the inquired social fact as a general principle for interpretive sociology. Both approaches, however, understate the role of the text as the paramount mediator of the explanation. In this article, I focused on the emergence of social knowledge when the text immerses the reader in the reading process. By iconic augmentation, the authors encode within the text not only their own experience but also more stable patterns through which the social experience is filtered both cognitively and emotionally. These stable patterns are then enlivened again once the text absorbs the reader in the iconic experience of reading. Thanks to iconic augmentation, aesthetically oriented texts (regardless of the genre) excel in channeling those patterns of social life that are "affective" rather than "effective" (Watson 2016, p. 437). Ashley Watson (2016, p. 437) introduced *sympraxis* as a semiotic concept wherein "the mimetic side of signs" is complemented by "energetic, emotive, involving, and creatively engaged." And this is exactly when the *lyrical* comes into play.

Lyrical sociology proposed by Andrew Abbott (2007, pp. 82–96) uses "lyrical stance" to account for the phenomenological situatedness of social actors in time, space, and their "emotional engagement" with the world, thus fulfilling the criteria of explanation in social aesthetics (see "first-person explanations" in Martin 2011, p. 23). Simultaneously, lyrical sociology mediates this account through a text by means of figurative language that is both emotionally *engaged*—the lyrical sociologist, as well as social actors, are "un-ironically engaged" (Abbott 2007, p. 74) in the situation—and *engaging*—the lyrical sociologist strives to engage the reader by the text. The goal, then, is to capture the social experience so that it does not lose

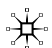
[37] See also Felski's (2008, p. 85) conception of literary mimesis as a "re-description," "a chain of interpretive processes rather than … an imitation."

its indexical emotional spin even when textually codified and eventually read. "Re-presenting" the ontological reality through lyrical style can mediate the sympractic dimensions of social life—together with inarticulate and non-discursive social experience—in a condensed and patterned way, along the lines of what Raymond Williams (1977, pp. 128–135) called a "structure of feeling." It is because the act of reading itself becomes an "experiential signifier" (Bartmanski 2016, p. 546), which arouses a specific mode of meaning-making and ignites the iconic social knowledge.

Since the foundation of sociology, social theories use metaphors and figurative style to account for discrepancies, ambiguities, and ever-going flux that *are iconic of social life*. Weber's "shell as hard as steel," Marx's "womb of the old society" or master metaphors "in which society 'itself' is imagined 'as' something: organism, cybernetic or autopoietic system, drama, game, text" (Turner 2010, pp. 2–3) did not become famous *despite* they employ aesthetic style but rather *because of that*. When encountering the aesthetic in literature, however, sociologists often shy away as if from the fear of "mysterious" and "sacred" poetic forms. This "syndrome of lyrical exceptionalism" (Váňa 2020c, p. 31) usually results in the ignorance of literary meaning in favor of studying production and reception or translating the aesthetic into neat sociological categories. My suggestion is that through reconsidering how both literary and social scientific texts (1) theorize, (2) represent, and (3) explain social life, we can more accurately trace out the fruitful social knowledge mediated by these texts.

We can consider Abbott's argument for lyrical sociology the other way around: Why should we invent new sophisticated metaphors and lyrical sociological accounts when we have, in fact, an abundance of lyrical texts at our disposal, but we ignore or misuse them? As I showed in the empirical analysis, mobilizing literature for social knowledge is especially useful when it comes to grasping the "gray zone" of social experience. The great strength of literature is capturing uncertainty, ambivalence, and indeterminacy through detailed descriptions and dynamic micro-situations, which are at the same time iconic of broader socio-historical frames. For example, *Bliss was it in Bohemia* depicts the semiotics of social life during normalization through daily small talks and random encounters. Having archetypal features of a "common Czech family" (Viewegh 1991), the characters go through situations that are unique and generally identifiable at the same time. The upcoming challenge for the strong program in the sociology of literature is to further elaborate on methodological intricacies of the relation between literary form/aesthetic structure of a particular text and various social milieus within which this text was produced, received, and to which it refers. Here, the traditional approaches of the sociology of literature, such as Lucien Goldmann's (1980) *genetic structuralism*, might be a worthwhile choice.

Acknowledgements Many thanks to the Supper Club and the Center for Cultural Sociology of Migration at the Department of Sociology in Brno, where I could discuss and develop my model over the last years. This research was financially supported by a Specific research project at Masaryk University, Project Number MUNI/A/1475/2020.



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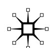

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