

The “Czech Dream”

Czech students lay bare the murky world of advertising

In the spring of 2003, colorful advertisements on Prague billboards heralded the opening of Český sen or “Czech Dream”, seemingly the latest of many amazing hypermarkets to open in the post-communist Czech Republic. Many Czechs eagerly awaited the opening of the store, which promised unbelievably low prices as well as a surprise for everyone who visited it on its first day of business.

Thousands turned out on the opening day only to find out that they were the victims of a giant hoax. The new hypermarket was nothing but a canvas façade in a meadow on the outskirts of Prague.

The prank initially provoked an outcry in the Czech media. Most commentators were outraged that the project had “wasted” taxpayers’ money, as it had received funding from the Czech Ministry of Culture. Some, however, recognized the importance of the event, which was actually a carefully planned incident designed to explore the way advertising manipulates peoples’ lives, especially in post-communist societies which have not yet become inured to the tricks of the ad industry.

Now, a year later, the men behind the scam – film students Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda – have released a movie documentary mapping out the story behind the “Czech Dream”. The New Presence asked them how and why they did it...

What inspired you to do this project?

We were somewhat inspired by a happening by the theatre personality Petr Lorenc, who, in 1997, distributed several hundred advertising posters for his fictitious hypermarket CIGADIGA. The opening ceremony took place in an empty meadow, where Petr had placed a banner saying “Better to take a walk in the woods instead.” GIGADIGA opened at a time when hypermarkets became part of our lives. In the course of a mere five years, foreign investors built 126 of them. In Holland, a country the same size as the Czech Republic,

it took them quarter of a century to build the same number.

Czechs started shopping in these hypermarkets more than people in other post-socialist countries. The new edition of the Czech dictionary of neologisms features words like hypermarketománie – a pathological addiction to shopping in hypermarkets or the worship of hypermarkets.

We were mesmerized by Petr@s happening, but it didn’t strive to comprehend the problem intellectually, but rather poetically. So we decided to make a subversive penetration into a world that an ordinary person usually doesn’t have a chance to enter, the playground of the CEOs, of international corporations, marketing consultants, creative consultants, but also politicians – the people who have an impact on the environment we live in. We wanted the viewer to take a look backstage, where all those advertising images and these slogans full of freshness, joy and happiness are produced. We commissioned a campaign to promote something that didn’t really exist, and we were curious to see what the advertising business was going to make of that challenge. Just as in judo, we used the strength of advertising so that its weight was used against its bearer.

How were you able to finance such a huge undertaking as this?

From the beginning, we knew that such a big project could be realized only on the basis of a given advertisement principle that reads: you hang our billboards all over town and we put your logo in the credits. That covered seventy-five percent of our costs. If you look at the end



Photo: Jan Zátorský

Shoppers eagerly awaiting the “grand opening”.

That Wasn't



Photo: Jan Zátorský

A "surprise" was promised for those who got there first.

credits, the logos roll on for over two minutes. It makes your head spin.

Did the project meet with much skepticism?

In fact, the controversial nature of the whole thing excited the managers we approached – they explained that the bigger the scandal, the bigger the advertising effect. The rest of the funding came from the Fund for the Support and Development of Czech Cinematography and from the co-producers, including Czech Television and the graduate school of arts. Although these are public institutions, they had the courage to participate in our project, and we really respect them for it.

How did you manage to keep the whole event a secret?

The film had several *nommes de guerre*, such as "Hypermarket with a Human Face," so that some people weren't even aware of the fact that they were working on the sinister *Czech Dream*. The advertising campaign was built on the principle of the so-called "teaser" – in other words, suspense and mystery. Our adverts said, "Don't Go There, Don't Spend Your Money, Don't Stand in Line – Opening May 31st at 10 am!" – "Where? You'll find out soon!"

We released the address of the site only a few days before the opening. We had to work with a renowned PR agency, which developed a "defensive strategy" in case all hell broke out. When two Czech papers wrote that *Czech Dream* was a fraud, that it was owned by Czech Television

and that the ad campaign cost hundreds of thousands of crowns, our PR agency issued a statement and forced the media to publish it. We claimed that the campaign didn't cost hundreds of thousands but millions, and that Czech TV didn't own us.

And what if things did "get ugly" on opening day once the crowd realized it was a hoax?

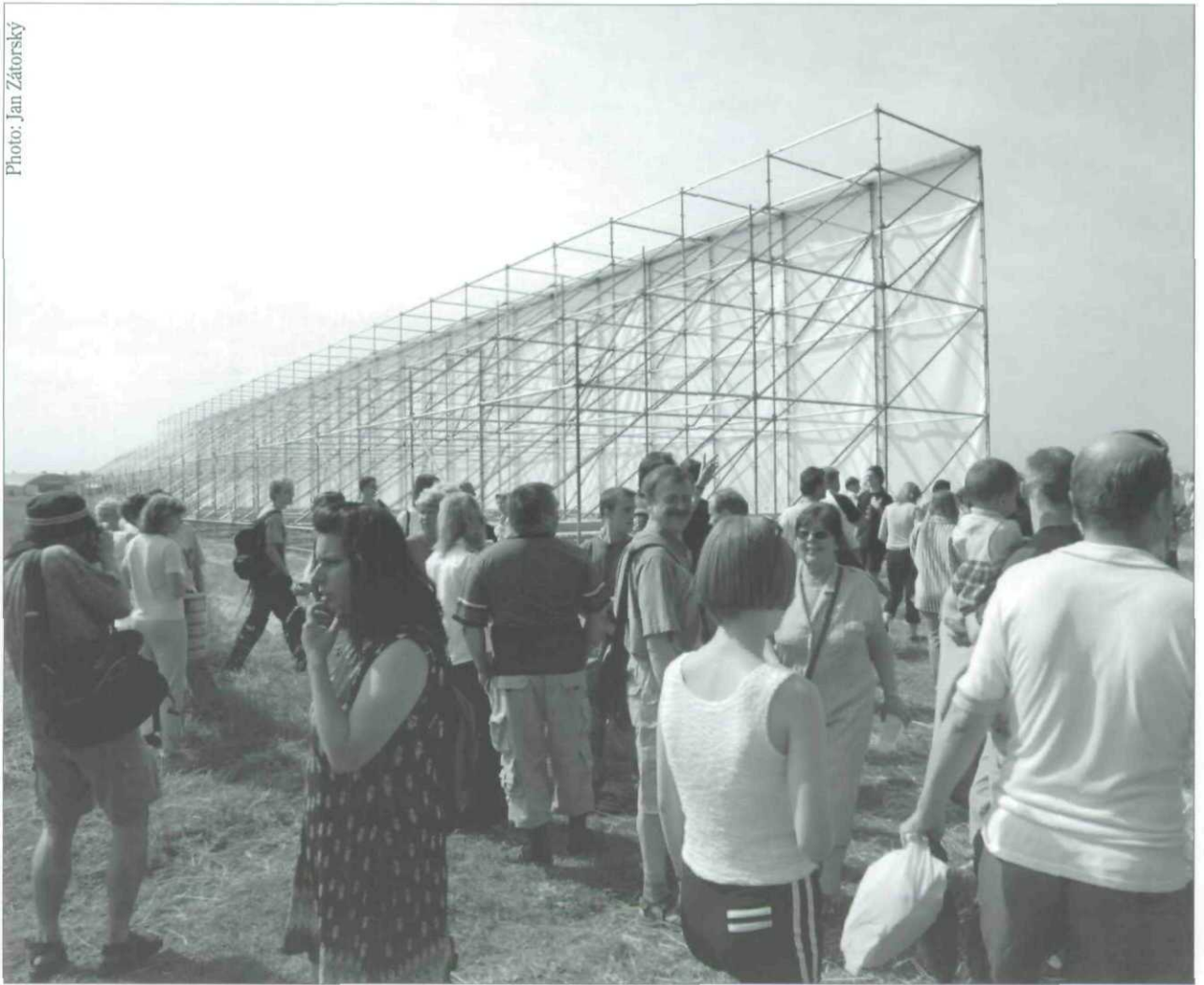
The danger was there. A few days before the opening of our hypermarket, army experts on crowd behavior came to warn us. They figured the crowd would burn the set,

The attitudes of the "manipulators"
are confronted in the film with
those of the "manipulated".

dismantle the scaffold, throw stones. They explained that in every crowd of a thousand people there are three hyperactive individuals, and each one of them immediately attracts ten other latent aggressors. The security managers we hired kept warning us that we had no defense against a hailstorm of rocks.

As it turned out, nothing happened, not even a single blow. Some even came to thank us, saying that for the first time in a long while they spent their Saturday in a field instead of among supermarket shelves...

Photo: Jan Zátorský



The "Czech Dream" is shattered

Does the film say something about post-communist Czech society, or is it more universal than that?

We were born in an advertisement-free country, with communist propaganda everywhere. And then things were turned on their head. Perhaps the author of the communist slogan of the 1980s, *Sovětský svaz, mírová hráz* ("The Soviet Union – A Dam of Peace") makes up slogans for sanitary towels and detergent today.

Our film does not present a simple thesis about the power of advertising. Instead, it tells a story about the people who collaborate with the advertising behemoth, who are paid for manipulating public opinion, which is our opinion. These are the people who look inside our heads in order to make their slogans penetrate even deeper. The attitudes of the "manipulators" are confronted in the film with those of the "manipulated". Both camps are exposed through a seemingly absurd situation, and they are forced to define their attitude towards something that in reality doesn't even exist.

Did you discover anything unexpected while making the film?

The eye-tracking camera. A remarkable device that tracks the exact trajectory of your gaze – this device knows where you are looking. It was originally developed for opticians, but has been most recently used in marketing. So, we had the design of our advertising leaflet "measured," wherein several respondents had a kind of star-trek helmet fixed on their head, and were randomly exposed to several hypermarket mail advertisements, including ours. On the monitor, we saw that women were drawn by the meat - their eyes would flit between the price tag and the photograph of a flank of bacon, while the men were attracted to electronics rather than food... All this data was processed and evaluated in detail. Fascinating spying, in the service of business.

The experts handling the device did tell us that they don't yet have any way of knowing which things people actually remember from what they've seen. But they

recommended that we enlarge our slogan, which said: "A surprise for everyone on the first day!"

What has the response to the film been like, both at home and abroad?

Within the first month, there were something like 200 Czech articles about the fact we were planning to release a film on the project. Most of them didn't go into what we were trying to say, but how much it all cost, who paid for it, and who approved it. But soon the news spread worldwide, and we found ourselves going to big festivals and galleries with a film that wasn't even finished. In New York, the MoMa Gallery helped us with a presentation, putting us in touch with a Brooklyn art community, where we screened parts of the film and then had a three-hour long discussion with artists from all around the world, from places like Japan, Iran, Palestine, Cuba, Columbia, and Argentina. We spoke about life in socialist Czechoslovakia, the advent of hypermarkets, and the return to Marx.

In the Czech Republic we launched the film via standard distribution in cinemas. So far we've managed to overcome the Czech viewers' prejudice against the genre of documentary cinema. Some critics have said that we were the most original Czech film of the last thirty years, the funniest-ever Czech documentary. Some even said our film depicts the absurdity of our time by virtue of its very existence.

During the first month, over 10,000 viewers saw *Czech Dream*. We'd be happy if our film helped open the way for

other documentary films to enter the cinemas. In Europe and the US, we are negotiating with several cinema distributors and television channels.

Wouldn't the film have worked better as a TV documentary?

We wanted to invite people to the cinema to see a non-fiction story. It's the cinema that makes direct interaction

We commissioned a campaign to promote something that didn't really exist

possible, as it provides space for discussions after screenings, which are rarely shorter than an hour. Usually the debates are quite lively, and quite often, we've seen viewers arguing among themselves! These electrifying debates have taught us all the things that our film is about.

It's interesting that it's was far more difficult to organize debates in multiplex cinemas, because the next film begins right away and you have to get out of the room, but outside there isn't any common space. It's the same principle that the furniture designers for McDonalds had: make the chairs uncomfortable so the people leave as soon as they've finished eating. The conveyor belt mustn't stop.

*Interview conducted by C il n O'Connor
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Photo: Jan Z atorsk y

Disgruntled "shoppers" head home

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