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# THE WAY WE APPLAUDED: HOW POPULAR CULTURE STIMULATES COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF THE SOCIALIST PAST IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA—THE CASE OF THE TELEVISION SERIAL *VYPRÁVĚJ* AND ITS VIEWERS

*Irena Carpentier Reifová, Kateřina Gillárová and Radim Hladík*

Popular television has some distinct privileges in representing the past. As Irwin-Zarecka asserts, it frames collective memory in at least two important ways: exposure, since "for many people, television offers the main, if not the only information they have about a great number of historical events"; and claims to historical accuracy, as "television presents us with reality-based drama, docudrama and document where the strength of writing, visuals, and faithfulness to detail all combine" (Irwin-Zarecka 1994, 155–156). These mnemonic capacities of television make it a worthwhile object of study in countries like the Czech Republic, which arguably still try to come to terms with their state socialist legacy.

For the analysis of how television programming intervenes in the formation of post-socialist identities, we are going to look at parallelism of different forms of remembering the past. We do not strive to put forward any particular 'genre of memory' (e.g., amnesia, nostalgia, displacement, collective guilt) nor any specific social enclave (former dissidents, intellectuals or alternative culture practitioners). Our main goal is to examine how memory (interrupted by the politics of a thick line after 1989) is secured by the "semiotic power of people" (Fiske 1987, 236) and how practices of reading popular culture are involved in this process.  We are interested in the ways which ordinary people use to regain the sense of

continuity by fostering different genres of memory and in the ways the mnemonic function of popular television can stimulate this process.

**<A>Post-Socialism and Memory Studies**

As the prefix 'post' suggests, state socialism still survives in Central and Eastern Europe, at least to the extent that we continue to designate it as a post-socialist space. It remains alive in personal and collective, private and public, dominant and marginalized narratives of the past. The continuing relevance of the past in the present constitutes the essence of collective memory (Halbwachs 1992) that transforms landscapes and mediascapes into countless places of memory (Nora 1989). Cultural and collective memory ensure, for better or worse, that the new identities emerging from the turmoil of fundamental socio-political transformations not only adhere to novel practices and institutions but also take root in the imaginary of the past.

The burgeoning discipline of memory studies has, to considerable extent, managed to empower narratives of the state socialist past that lack the sanction of scholarly historiography and yet remain formative of both social bonds and animosities among social groups and nations. However, memory studies so far have not arrived at a consensual account of the principles of commemoration, remembering and forgetting that help post-socialist Europe make sense of the state-socialist experience. As the coiner of the term 'collective memory' Maurice Halbwachs (Halbwachs 1992) predicted, the very multiplicity of groups in which individual members of society participate seems to preclude a unitary formation of memory. Gil Eyal suggests, however, that more is at stake than simply the dispersed ways in which we think collective memory to operate. In his words:

> The sense of a crisis of memory, and the diagnosis of too much or too little memory, are generated not by the universal nature of human memory but by a historically specific *will to memory*, a constellation of discourses and practices within which memory is entrusted with a certain goal and function, and is invested, routinely, as an institutional matter, with certain hopes and fears as to what it can do. It is always against this goal that memory is measured and found wanting. (Eyal 2004, 6–7)

In light of these remarks, we find it advisable to refrain from sweeping statements on the workings of memory in the post-socialist context that diagnose it one-sidedly in terms of trauma, nostalgia, amnesia or in another pathological or functional variety of remembrance. Instead, we prefer to assume from the outset that collective memory consists of a wide repertoire of practices and discourses whose variants may be conducive to different results of remembering and forgetting. Specifically, we will give an equal consideration to the two main concepts that are most commonly summoned in order to describe the bearing of the state-socialist past on the post-socialist present: nostalgia and (cultural) trauma. Although these concepts tend to be mutually exclusionary—with nostalgia making the past an object of longing, while trauma conceiving of it as a haunting image—we conducted a qualitative research of television audiences that suggests their discursive coexistence.

**<A>Post-Socialist Memory and Nostalgia**

In the Czech Republic as well as in many other post-socialist countries recollections of the socialist era have been on the agenda since the early 1990s, when the first measures of transitional justice—such as restitutions of nationalized property or disqualification of former elites from the state administration—were discussed and implemented (see e.g. Teitel 2000, Přibáň 2002). With the inevitable unavailability of proper historiographical accounts,

collective memories dominate the representation of the past and have been constitutive of Czech political arena (Eyal 2003).

To date, the most complex account of the diverse ‘registers’ of collective memory on which Czech social actors draw in order to construe their positive self-image has been presented by French sociologist Françoise Mayer. In her work, *Češi a jejich komunismus* (*Czechs and Their Communism*; Mayer 2009), she shows that among Czechs there are in fact a number of distinct renditions of the past, which can be traced to particular social groups. She documents the quick shift of official memory from the concept of national ‘integration’ to ‘decommunization.’ However, official memory fails to be decisively hegemonic. Other competing discourses of remembrance include the narrative of ‘betrayal’ among the members of the former ruling Communist Party, while the ‘memory for identity’ dominates among the supporters of the CP’s post-socialist successor. The political prisoners of the Stalinist era tend to remember the past in terms of ‘resistance,’ whereas the later dissidents of the Normalization era (1969–89) prefer its legalistic condemnation. Distinct registers of memory can be also identified among intellectuals and historians. Mayer, however, chooses to leave out one register from her analysis. The blind spot of her treatise is in fact quite significant and consists of the vast and ever-growing archive of popular and media culture, which she only mentions in passing, with a disdain for the presumed triviality of the products of the cultural industry: “The enthusiastic reception [of mass culture artifacts that represent the state-socialist past] can probably be best explained by the fact that they offer a nonpolitical view of history and thus return the past to all those people ‘without a story’” (Mayer 2009, 258).

Such assumptions imply that the texts of popular culture cannot sustain the critical work of memory; and thus the recollections of the past by such means only generate an uncritical remembrance of a nostalgic type. The nostalgic discourses usually refer to the socialist past either directly (better to say indexically) by recycling individual tokens of an

authentic socialist culture or indirectly (symbolically) by producing new representations of the past.[i] To put it simply, nostalgic discourses either *present* the preserved parts of the past (e.g. pop singers or actors who became popular in socialist times as epitomes of the era) or they *represent* 'them' (e.g. contemporary feature films going back to the days of socialism) (Dominková 2008).

Nostalgia, "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed, […] a sentiment of loss and displacement" (Boym 2001, xiii), has over the course of modernity acquired temporal as well as spatial sense. It now often counts among threatening emotions of post-modern Western life and many times it has been theorized as such. Fredric Jameson, for instance, sees *nostalgia films* as emblematic of the period of late capitalism, which erodes a sense of history: "The nostalgia film was never a matter of some old-fashioned 'representation' of historical content, but instead approached the 'past' through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image." (Jameson 1991, 19) Linda Hutcheon (1998), however, suggests post-modern irony as an antidote to the arresting effects of nostalgia. Jameson, in actuality, also recognizes that there is a utopian impulse operating even in nostalgic artifacts (Jameson 1990, 229). The problem with nostalgia lies in its renunciation of history, which according to Jameson amounts to giving up the only way to actually pursue the utopian impulse. This inbuilt subversion in the nostalgic longing of the very means for realizing a utopian goal constitutes the defining aporia of nostalgia. Svetlana Boym attempts to address this duality by distinguishing conservative "restorative nostalgia" from a more critical "reflective nostalgia," which is able to connect "historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past" (Boym 2001, 49).

Some post-socialist discourses mediating between the past and the present, of which popular culture genres create a considerable part, were demarcated and explicated by cultural scholars as post-socialist nostalgia (Enns 2007, Boyer 2006, Volčič 2007, Reifova 2009).

Post-socialist nostalgia cannot be fully subsumed under postmodern nostalgia as it is experienced in the West. Although post-socialist nostalgia started to grow in the environment influenced by a convergence of post-socialism and postmodernism, it also resonates with a modernist vision of history, of which state socialism was probably the last big project (Ray 1997). The specificity of post-socialist nostalgia stems from the fact that it strives for an integration of memory divided by the social rupture in 1989 (more precisely, futile but compulsive attempts to attain integration) in the sense of including the 'forbidden' past in a larger historical continuity. Post-socialist nostalgia is a memory-compensating nostalgia; it helps to restore the memory that was disintegrated by the break between the socialist and neoliberal capitalist systems. In response to Mayer's judgment discussed above, it can be said to be a vindication of the status of stories that have been forgotten in many official and some scholarly records. Hence, the compensation of memory in post-socialist Czechoslovakia via the mnemonic function of popular culture is partly of an anti-hegemonic nature.

The official, dominant discourses of economics and politics in the 1990s, inaugurated by the state authorities, political representatives or judiciary, were firmly grounded in the logics of disjunction, a divorce with the socialist past. Most social subsystems were built anew to be totally different from the past, as in privatization in the economical sphere or lustration in elite human resources. The past was defined as something that should be replaced with a better present—and if not fully erased, then only because capacity to remember the old faults increases the chance that they will not be repeated in the future. The past was simply defined by the dominant discourses as a loose end, which should have stayed loose, not as an object to which the society should reconnect. The logics of disjunction became hegemonic in the early transformational years of the 1990s. Michael D. Kennedy argues that the idea of a profound historical rupture lies at the core of 'transition culture.' He remarks with regards to its treatment of the past: "Transition's tradition tends to draw more on capitalist experience

from across the world than it does on any nation's socialist past. Socialism is something to be escaped, repressed, and destroyed" (Kennedy 2002, 13). The societal turnover from state socialism to capitalism settled conditions for a new anti-hegemonic struggle—one that is about gaining less restricted access to the past; about nurturing collective memory which would embrace broader repertoire than just an uncompromising denouncement of the past. That is why we think that the first attempts to compensate for displaced memory took place in the demiworld of popular culture, below the radar of transition's proponents, and not in more highly valued elite cultural areas. Popular culture remains one of the principal sites where its consumers can experience (nostalgic) links to the socialist past without having to face public reproach.

**<A>Post-Socialist Memory and Cultural Trauma**

Apart from nostalgia, the concept that many other scholars find fruitful in explaining how post-socialist societies relate to their own pasts is the one of cultural trauma—in spite of its bad reputation as a culturalist buzzword. According to Jeffrey Alexander, "cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander 2004, 1). Many skeptical queries appeared in connection with this definition. Is trauma an event or rather the way it is remembered? (Eyerman 2004, 62; Caruth 1995, 4). Can trauma be cultural at all? Can it be collective in a sense of having a new quality going beyond a summary of individual traumas? (Joas 2005, 372). Should non-violent events be also included into the category? (Kansteiner 2004, 206). And then there is a group of thinkers who feel that taking the concept of trauma not only beyond the borders of medicine and psychoanalysis, where it

originated, but also mainly outside of the discourse on Holocaust, is a sacrilege and causes inflation of the concept's value.

While working with the concept of cultural trauma it is important to stay away from simplifications such as confusing cultural trauma with "an aggregate of individual traumata" (Carpentier 2007, 251, see also Kansteiner 2004, 209). It is clear that cultural trauma is not a summary of disconnected, personal reminiscences about approximately the same period. It must have an added quality of collectivity—shared clusters of meanings associated with the particular traumatizing event. But it should also be said that symptoms of cultural trauma are only accessible via individual stories and personal voices. The memories of individual survivors are an inevitable source of data, which of course have to be further selected and processed. General demonization of all uses of the personal in cultural trauma research thus makes little sense.

In spite of all the discontents, it seems that some sort of collective shock (Sztompka 2000, 457), shattering or paralysis is generally accepted as at least a partial element of cultural trauma. Radical social changes (together with many other events, which can be of natural or social origins, momentary eruptions or long-term processes, violent massacres or discursive pressures) such as the turnovers of social systems in Central and Eastern Europe, meet this condition. We find it inspiring to look for indices of cultural trauma in the viewer's recollections provoked by the retrospective television serial. If the trauma is supposed to be cultural it must penetrate the general public and television-induced remembering provides an insight into exactly this layer of memory.

What is exceptionally troublesome about post-socialist cultural trauma is that it cannot be easily located in one single site. Piotr Sztompka reduces this question to the social and economic insecurities of newly established capitalism. "The event greeted with greatest enthusiasm by most people, has resulted, for some time and for some groups, in traumatic

experience known as the pains of transition (e.g. unemployment, status degradation, impoverishment, rise of crime)" (Sztompka 2000, 458). We think that there are at least three types of "conducive conditions" (Smelser 1962, 22) for post-socialist cultural trauma. First, there are the new instabilities mentioned in Sztompka's above quote. Second, it could also be activated by the occurrence of embarrassing or anxious life situations in totalitarian socialism. And third, a mere disruption in the continuity of everyday, personal lives and workings of social institutions could also constitute it. It is most likely that it is not an 'either/or' case, but that all these processes run alongside one another and compose post-socialist cultural trauma together. It is not only a sequential (Sztompka 2000, 453), but also a multilayered phenomenon.

The collapse of state socialism inspires us to see this kind of cultural trauma more as a dislocation (temporary lapse of determining power of structure) than as Alexander's 'horrendous event' with clearly devastating consequences. Dislocation, a concept introduced by Ernesto Laclau (who rephrased Gramsci's 'organic crisis'), explains mainly a discursive divide between 'before' and 'after' the traumatic event. Dislocation refers to the rupture in the order of the things as it was fixed by the now shattered discourse. In his reading of Laclau, Torfing understands it as "a destabilization of a discourse that results from the emergence of events which cannot be domesticated, symbolized or integrated within the discourse in question" (1999, 301). Technical and methodological bias embedded in the dislocation approach avoids evaluative insights into the difference between the 'before' and 'after' and enables us to see ambiguities of dislocations. Looking at the dislocatory dimension of cultural trauma (if it has one) helps to see that, "dislocatory events on one hand threaten identities, on the other hand they are foundations on which new identities are constituted" (Laclau 1990, 39). From this perspective it cannot be overlooked that dislocation may have destructive as well as productive aspects (Critchley and Marchart 2004, 207).[ii] As far as some segments of

the post-socialist cultural trauma can be seen as a dislocation, we are interested precisely in the tension between its destructive and productive side. The popular urge for the restoration of memory (not the least by use of popular culture, including television) falls into the productive category. For many years television was condemned for being ‘presentist,’ having a bias for immediacy and thus nullifying history. Only recently television was exculpated from this kind of sinning. According to Mimi White “history, duration and memory are as central to any theoretical understanding of television´s discursive operations as liveness and concomitant ideas of presence, immediacy, and so forth” (White 1999). We would like to argue (and take an advantage of) that television not only makes history an important part of its programming, but is also indispensible in stimulating (and thus cocreating) collective memory. It provides ‘the food for memory’ and its bias towards personalization, narrativization and iconicity makes the process of memory creation accessible to diverse groups of viewers. We can also say that the higher the cultural diversity is on the input of the collective memory, the more beneficial it is.

## <A>Television as a Mnemonic Medium

In order to explore the adequacy of concepts of nostalgia and cultural trauma to representations of the state-socialist past in post-socialist popular culture, we completed a study of a successful retrospective television program. The guiding principle of the analysis was not a search for one-way media effects but instead a focus on the viewers’ use of media contents for making meaning of the past. With this purpose, we examine how the retrospective television serial *Vyprávěj* (*Tell Me How It Was*; Czech Television, 2009–10) facilitates recollection and thinking about the socialist past. The research took the form of focus groups in which the viewers talked about their use of *Vyprávěj* as a mnemonic device that helps them to deal with the cleavage between the socialist past and the capitalist present.

The visual sociology approach informed the study (Banks 2007): we used the TV serial partly as audiovisual elicitation from the research participants within the focus groups. [iii] This technique—among others—should be an effective tool to generate the feelings associated with certain contexts, and provide data enriched with the abstract layer of emotions.

*Vyprávěj* is a hybrid comedy-docudrama serial. It presents the story of an ordinary family whose fictive everyday life is intertwined with real political events and their consequences. The show was produced by the public broadcaster Česká televize (Czech Television) as a program commemorating the 20th anniversary of the fall of the state socialist regime in 1989. The narrative is packaged in four seasons. The first two seasons (covering the periods 1964–75 and 1975–85) have already aired, while the seasons covering the periods 1985–95 and 1995–2005 are forthcoming.[iv] Among the serial's defining characteristics are the shifts between the enacted plot and the documentary parts and the heavy dependence of its visual aspect on pedantic fidelity to the period's lifestyle. The average rating of the serial per episode in 2009 was 1.3 million viewers. It is an above-average result even in primetime and qualifies *Vyprávěj* as a great favorite with viewers.[v] It was extremely popular with female viewers (women constituted up to two thirds of the spectatorship) and also achieved good results with the young audience in the age segment of 25–34.

The audience research took place in May 2010 in Prague, the Czech Republic. We organized eight focus groups chosen from viewers who had independently written to Czech Television about the serial. The population of the study thus consists of respondents who cared to express their appreciations of the serial, complaints regarding supposed inaccuracies, questions, etc., to The Audience Center of Czech Television. On our request, the Center sent an email to addresses in its database describing the concerns of our research and eliciting participation in the qualitative audience survey.

The final sample thus represented active viewers, fans who apparently like to share their opinion with the producers as well as with scholars. There were 42 respondents in total, of which 23 were female and 19 male. The groups were controlled for age and organized into two clusters: the first one consisted of young people who do not have any personal adult experience with socialism; the second included the participants who do have personal adult experience with socialist everyday life; and two of the groups were mixed with regards to age of the respondents.[vi]

We conceived of the processes of memory reproduction through the serial *Vyprávěj* as a constant activity of comparing the retro-signifiers (signifiers that signal the particular text as being of the past) with the stock of knowledge that the audiences have available to them. In this respect, Pierre Sorlin speaks of “historical capital,” which the audience needs to possess in order to understand a particular narrative as a representation of the past (Sorlin 2000, 37). In our case, it may be more appropriate to refer to this stock of knowledge as ‘memory capital.’ Kansteiner´s scrutiny of the processes of collective memory highlights two different positions: “memory makers” and “memory consumers” (Kansteiner 2002, 180). In this context the revision of his typology suggests itself: on the one hand, we have memory producers, but on the other hand, there are memory *prosumers* (productive consumers), who use their stock of knowledge in encounters with the mass media representations that they consume. The memory prosumers of *Vyprávěj* used retro-signifiers in two ways: retro-signifier as a *trigger* and retro-signifier as a *reality indicator*.

The first role refers to the situation when the retro-signifier generated reconnection with one’s personal memories from the state-socialist past. In this case the participants liberated themselves from the narrative of the series and started to narrate their own stories. This “aberration” in reading (Eco 1979, 141) took basically two forms. The first form stimulated subjective memories that were connected relatively closely to one’s private stock

of knowledge and thus were not shared with others participants. The second form engaged the viewers with collective memories, by which we mean more encompassing stories shared by all participants.

In their second role, the retro-signifiers functioned as *indicators of true or false* elements in the series. In this case, the participants remained committed to the text and confronted it with their stock of knowledge. In a sort of interpretational conflict,[vii] the participants proclaimed the serial to be a truthful representation of reality if it corresponded to their stock of knowledge and a misrepresentation if it contradicted their knowledge. Typically, this occurred with factual types of information. However, there was a sub-genre of the text that was excluded from this principle: the documentary section. The serial consists of two types of text: the predominantly fictional section (the story of the family) and the minor documentary one. The participants perceived this latter text as inherently true. According to them, the documentary perfected the representation of the past, making it appear 'the way it was.' The inclusion of period footage was accepted as a general factual framework—the 'historical capital' in which the viewers had a share—of the fictional plot, which in turn was the point of personal identification with the audiovisual text; the part of the serial that allowed the viewers to re-experience, relive their own past. Compared to the fictional plot, which was perceived as a dynamic and open text, the documentary section figured in the focus group as a static element, a given content that is not to be discussed. One participant, for example, commented on the screening of documentary clips from the serial in the following way:

> MFG 8 [commenting on the documentary section]: Such was the general opinion, or whatever was valid. Whereas the family, which was there, it lived its own life and, overall, it was as if it was not aware of the period, it was not aware of politics. So it was kind of a great contrast and it was a kind of refreshing moment in the serial.

Besides the two roles of retro-signifiers, we also identified their organization into four basic categories. The scale proceeds from the physical and concrete signifiers that tend to appear with higher frequency to the most abstract ones that exhibit lower frequency. All of these categories can function in both of the aforementioned ways. The categories can be labelled in this order:

**[PLACE FIGURE 11.1 HERE]**

Figure 11.1

The first term embodies all of the visual elements that showed up in the series and served as indexical traces (Rosen 2001) of the state socialist past. The objects of daily use such as clothing, design, furniture and appliances were the most frequent case. The other ones, which were specific to the time period, belonged to the category of 'socialist symbols,' e.g. a pioneer scarf or a bouquet of red carnations. An image of the latter in a clip inspired one participant to make a comment in the course of which he obviously relied on the collective memory of others in the group:

> MFG 1: Those terrible red carnations, right?! Nowadays, I probably do not know anyone who would like carnations. And besides, the oath of the pioneers, you said it perfectly. I myself had to recite at the People's Committee of Prague 10, I remember that very well.

**[PLACE FIGURE 11.2 HERE]**

Figure 11.2 The scene from the second sample used in the focus groups. Jarka reads her poem at the International Women's Day meeting to glorify socialist womanhood.

While the first category of retro-signifiers functioned both as a narrative trigger, i.e. a signal for association of personal memories, and as a reality indicator, the other three

categories were biased toward the function of the narrative trigger and motivated the participants to tell the stories about their own past. With increasing levels of abstraction, they were less likely to be subjected to a challenge or a critique within the group of discussants.

The second category centered on certain characters, particularly on their stereotyped features.[viii] In comparison with other categories, this type of retro-signifier was somewhat more often used as a generator of personal narratives. Thus, for instance, the character of a shop floor party official in the serial inspired this recollection of a real world person:

> MFG 2: A shady character. It reminds me of my boss at that time. […] He spelled "fish" with "y", but he was a manager and a Member of Parliament, right?! So it was very difficult to work with him, difficult to work with him, for real, and he was also very dangerous.

The third category covers ritualized practices such as queuing or marching in a Labor Day parade. These retro-signifiers were quite often coupled with objects that were symbolic of socialism. Thus this more abstract category of retro-signifiers combined with the rather concrete category of the visual elements. A female discussant recalled a scene from the series in which people line up in front of a store as an instance of this category:

> MFG 1: For example, the fridge. Personally, I have never had to queue for a fridge but I know exactly that this is what our parents used to tell us, the way in which one had to queue for bananas, so one also had to queue for those fridges.

Historical events represented the highest level of retro-signifiers. This fourth category is underrepresented in the serial in comparison with the two previous narrative-triggering

categories. August 1968, the month of the occupation of Czechoslovakia by five of the Warsaw Pact armies, which put an end to the reformist movement known as the Prague Spring, is an example of such a retro-signifier that was included in the televised text and triggered remembrance on the part of the viewers.

> MFG 3: When I used to go to school, my dad once checked out my notes from the civics class, it was in the seventh grade, and it caught his attention, so he read them, and there it was briefly described, what it was, that it happened.

**[PLACE FIGURE 11.3 HERE]**

Figure 11.3 The scene from the third sample used in the focus groups. The Dvořák family and their friends astonishedly listen to the radio announcement about the self-burning act of the student Jan Palach in 1969.

Each category of retro-signifiers has its specific language. Also, it was articulated in a manner differentiating one from each other. We highlighted the expressive formulations and were able to group them into three modes of enunciation:

1) nostalgia
2) morality
3) experience/expertise

The first mode, nostalgia**,** attempts to describe the case of memories that were reproduced through emotional means of expression and mostly by using first-person singular or plural. This discourse was characteristic of the usage of retro-signifiers as a mnemonic trigger and encompassed all of the categories of retro-signifiers.

> MFG 1: Hearing [the song] “Bratříček” reminds me of Karel Kryl. I recall, when we were at the weekend house, our parents opened a bottle of wine and we listened to the tapes, that one was noisy, God knows how many times it had been copied, so this is something that is deeply ingrained in me. It even evokes nice feelings in me because it was simply nice. Weekends with the family, this comes to my mind.

The next mode is close to expressions of ‘nostalgia,’ at least in the sense that in both of these modes the participants assume a role of the narrator. However, in the ‘morality’ mode, unlike in the mode of ‘nostalgia,’ the narratives of the discussants called forth collective and shared memories rather than private ones. The more abstract categories of retro-signifiers were employed in this mode of discourse. Also, the typical means of expression in this case was the third person in either singular or plural.

> MFG 1: It worked so that everybody was pushed into joining the party, and so those who didn’t want to join, they had to face sanctions such as: “What about your boy—he wants to go to college.” Like the kids couldn’t get into a school and such. So under this regime people had to constantly think about whether to sign up and keep their mouth shut and let the kids study or not to sign up, keep their pride, but the kids, right, garbage men and such. It worked, the pressure was probably normal in those times; it was exerted onto people who had not joined the party yet.

When the retro-signifiers functioned as a reality indicator and thus were confronted with a person’s stock of knowledge, the participants tended to take on the role of critic or expert. Whereas in the two previous cases (of nostalgia and morality) the participants took

over the narrator role from the text, in this third case, they would move away from the text and position themselves on its outside. In addition, the 'morality' and 'nostalgia' modes were more connected to emotional means of expression, whereas the mode of **'**experience/expertise**'** was shaped by factual and evaluative vocabulary. The mode was thus identified by the usage of verbs that express value judgments and are conjugated in the first person singular.

> MFG 1: That was completely wrong, I think, it was the biggest mistake that I have noticed in it, and it had to do with the Nuselský Bridge and those R-1 trains, the construction of the subway, the R-1 trains, and the underground tram […] Firstly, that was simply set in a wrong time, I think, the dramaturgy failed with this one, I think that there was a difference of three years when compared to the facts, and secondly, I think that it was—I do understand that they wanted to make it attractive for the viewers, but they overdid it.

No doubt, these three modes of enunciation were interconnected. For example, if the participants used retro-signifiers as triggers and took on the roles of a nostalgic or a moralist, they tended to present their subjective memories as objective ones—they would speak of 'the way it was.'

> MFG 3: […] all the women were celebrating and all the men were drinking like fish, everything was subordinated to MDŽ celebration.

When faced with other participants' narratives and memories with contrary claims, they would defend their own truth and take recourse in the enunciative position of an expert

or an experienced witness. However, as the discussion progressed, the memories that were originally perceived as taken for granted and objective became more relative and subjective in their rendition.

M1/M2 FG 2:

M2: I was born in 1963, my mom got married sometime in 1960, and she had the stiletto boots, the synthetic leather ones, she had those stiletto boots.

M1: But later, certainly later.

M2: Certainly before I was born. Because she had those when she was frequenting dance lessons with dad.

M1: Because I have photos…

M1/M2 FG3:

M1: And another thing that bothered me personally, there was a girl who wore the same skirt I've bought in a shop recently, a dotted one. So I told to myself…

M2: But the fashion is repeating!

M1: I know but I told to myself it was not possible.

M2: Besides, eighties are in…

The 'experience/expertise' mode was activated when older participants defined themselves as such to the younger viewers who did not have an authentic experience with communist times. Even though the older participants considered the serial to be an important didactic tool, they still had a tendency to emphasize the incapacity of the youngsters to read the serial 'the right way.' Thanks to their lived experience, they would perceive themselves as the rightful experts of the textual interpretation.

MFG 8: After all, if I had experienced something, I therefore have a source of knowledge in what I had seen, like, it didn't concern the regime directly. For example, the corrupted deeds that you couldn't see, those can't be included in a family TV series. Then one family would be a target of every wrongdoing and that wouldn't be credible. And, precisely, the documentary footage, it provides a framework, it follows a certain topic, so that they [the young ones] simply realize in what ways the regime was unlawful. Why the times are better today and so on.

On the other hand, the younger participants would sometimes counter similar claims based on their experience with claims based on expertise. Their expertise did not derive from authenticity; instead, they would refer to external authorities. Significantly, however, they would not appeal to the authority of historiography. While the senior participants supported their arguments by using narratives of their subjective or collective memories, the junior ones used the style of speech reminiscent of mass media. The phrase 'I think,' often accompanied by the clause 'my close relatives said,' were the typical means of expression in this instance.

M1/M2 FG 8:

M1: I think that even the party membership had to be based on a voluntary principle because you can't have a party in which you force the people to participate in the power […].

M2: But that isn't true. Well, I think that you have some distorted information [laugh] or actually some distorted ideas. So.

M1: Why do you think that it was different, or do you…

> M2: Well, I know it from my own experience. And from the stories of my close relatives.

'Nostalgic' and 'moralist' roles were more readily accepted by the cluster of older participants. Relegating communist ideology to the background opened up a way for them to recount their childhood and teenage lives. In contrast to other television programs in which the political regime is foregrounded, the *Vyprávěj* serial allowed them to experience the pleasure of reconnecting with the past. They were not forced, either by the textual composition of the serial, or by the administrators of the focus group, to defend the positive emotions that they attached to childhoods spent in the state socialist period—a period typically presented as inherently bad in normative, post-socialist representations.

> MFG 8: It affects me more than the politics. The politics, the documentary, it is very distant. And it can't even be named properly, not even understood, let alone captured somehow, so why should I care. I'm interested in what affects me, in the things that I have to deal with, and there it was in the story.

To sum up, in our research we found out that the retro-signifiers—ranging from physical objects through characters and ritualized practices to events—offered by the television serial *Vyprávěj* did not function simply as clues of historical time; rather, they were used by audiences as mnemonic devices for generating their own subjective or shared memories. The remembrance thus stimulated occurred in different modes, which were expressed by the roles of a nostalgic, a moralist, or a (lay) expert. The more abstract the retro-signifiers were, the less likely they were to be used as reality indicators and the more likely they were seen as taken-for-granted aspects of the past. The mode of experience/expertise was

typical for the young participants' rhetoric. It was also utilized by the senior participants to establish themselves as more knowledgeable in front of younger viewers. However, it is important to underscore the tentative status of our observations regarding a possible generation gap. The database at our disposal included only a limited number of younger viewers. The latter provide the producers of the serial with significantly less feedback. This could be either due to the younger cohorts' lesser interest in watching the serial, or to their reluctance to share their opinions and fandom.

## <A>Indices of Traumatized Memory

A considerable part of the respondents' comments reflected an experience of cultural trauma. This category encompasses comments which relate to new social insecurities brought about by capitalist society, but mainly to disruption of biographical/institutional continuity (dislocation) and feelings of embarrassment/stress about life in totalitarian socialism. Most relevant parts of the comments were those untangling the coping strategies that people use to reconcile themselves with the embarrassing or unsettling flashbacks and incorporate these recollections back into the memory.

The respondents hinted at three separate reasons for keeping the collective memory active in the sense of overcoming the rupture between the present days and the socialist past. They can be summarized as: 1) preventive continuity, 2) historiographic continuity, 3) everyday continuity. Preventive continuity is the least controversial form of the memory-compensating approach and as such it has been part of the post-socialist mentality since the beginning of the 1990s. It recognizes the relevance of uninterrupted memory as prevention against the return of totalitarian socialism.

MFG1: To me, it is really important that these days shall not come back, I mean the communists who ruled here…

Preventive continuity is close to historiographic continuity, although the latter refrains from making moral judgments and objectifies the period of socialism as an inseparable stage of history.

MFG4: It is important for the young generation because it is becoming part of history. So they should know, because it is a piece of our history.

The most refined and nuanced meanings were included in the respondents' comments about the continuity of everyday life. They felt that the socio-political rupture between the past and the present had been overly generalized to the extent that it also affected the integrity of everyday life. The respondents indicated a two-way nexus between seemingly detached periods of the past and the present in the sphere of the everyday: in some respects, the past was not so different from the present, and in others the present is even permeated with the past. Very often, respondents voiced their opinion that everyday actors in totalitarian socialism took their living conditions for granted as a given social environment, very much like contemporary people understand their social realities nowadays.

MFG4: The last 20 years brought enough information about all the bad things that happened. To do justice, it should also be said that people were living their normal lives in those days too. Brutality, prosecution, penalization, these things impacted on one part of population. The majority of the people tried to conduct their normal lives even in those days. Under communism, we did not live in the trees; marching under

the red flags wasn't our daily bread. Normal human affairs were also on the agenda, such as television shows.

MFG5: I was happy to be a pioneer.[ix] I took it for granted.

Moderator about S2: How would you feel if it were you, participating in the International Women's day celebration?

MFG3: Mhm, I'm not sure, maybe we wouldn't think it to be anything special or even be able to see that it was totally […] crazy.

Another connection between the past and the present is seen in the transference of some habits (assumed to be socialist deformations) into the capitalist system.

MFG4 [about S1]: Comrade Karpíšek is exactly the young career-oriented person who was told: "stick with us and you will be well off." They taught him what to say, what words one should use. It is absolutely normal today in any sales company. If you go for a sales person position, they teach you the ways in which to move and speak. Absolutely normal today…

**[PLACE FIGURE 11.4 HERE]**

Figure 11.4 The scene from the first video sample used in the focus groups. Comrade Karpíšek (left) recruits Mr. Dvořák (right) to become a member of the Communist Party.

A rich source of data indicating cultural trauma were the comments in which respondents rehearsed their feelings of embarrassment or anxiety during totalitarian socialism. Alternatively, they interiorized the feelings of the serial protagonists.

> Moderator: Did you consider the scene picturing the bus trip to Austria to be funny?

> MFG2: Not at all, I was really sympathetic with the characters, so that the custom officers would not find any illegal stuff.

> MFG2: I feel strange about crossing borders to this day. Today, one doesn't even have to present a passport and yet I still feel fear and get goose bumps.

A concept that gets referenced often in scholarly reflection on the aftermath of state socialism is the *guilt* for collaboration or silent agreement with the CP rule. The entire 1990s discourse on decommunization, to a great extent, dealt with a redistribution of the guilt for "the widespread injustice of the communist regime, imprisoning people for stating publicly their political views opposing the policies of the Communist Party and the regime in general" (Marada 2007, 91). Guilty feelings (as well as shame, flagellation, metaphoric schizophrenia and embarrassment) were indeed present in our respondents' comments, although not in a straightforward form. Guilty feeling presupposes the existence of a perpetrator—partial or full acceptance of such a role and a stigma left on the cultural memory. In Czech post-socialist culture the position of a perpetrator—the symbolic figure guilty of and responsible for the crimes of totalitarian socialism—was never fully determined. Who is to be blamed? The CP top executives? All members of the Communist Party? The entire silent majority? As far as the position of a perpetrator is a no man's and everybody's land, it is open to being assumed

(or imposed upon) by wide range of actors. The process of consenting to the role of perpetrator may, indeed, include or induce cultural trauma—Bernhard Giesen coined the concept of 'trauma of perpetrators' to refer to a similar development in post-Nazi Germany (Giesen 2004, 115). However, our data disclose a more complex structure of guilty feelings in the traumatic memories of socialism than is usually assumed. We found symptoms of guilty feelings fidgeting with a role of perpetrator in an unusually delicate way. Uncertainty permeating the identity on the move between roles of a victim and a perpetrator can be demonstrated by comparing the two following quotes:

> MFG7 [about S1]: My father was forced to enter the Communist Party. They came to talk to him about his daughter (it was me) having good school results and if it would not suit her to go to the high school? So after this, kind of, blackmail and persuasion he had to agree to become a party member.

> MFG3 [about watching the episode capturing the Labor Day parade with her 9-year-old daughter]: […] and I tell her, go sit and watch, look at Husák,[x] look at the way we applauded him.

In the first statement the discussant clearly sees her father as a victim. On the contrary, the logic of the second statement is based on a deeply embedded duality. The respondent seems insecure about who exactly should be an object of the gaze: the communist President Husák or those who applauded him? Who should be tightly observed: the communist apparatchik or 'us,' the obedient, anonymous mass? Where is the borderline between perpetrators and mere victims in the film scene? The comment reflects people's potential collaboration and shows that the position of a perpetrator resists being bounded to the top

communist officials. Consequently, the identity of the respondent as an ordinary person, who applauded when told to do so, moves on the victim–perpetrator scale and hardly ever rests in peace. In this case the respondent compulsively invites her daughter to pay attention to the conforming behavior of the older generation. It can be interpreted as an act of masochism and flagellation, as if it could undo the shame. In the above sketched comparison, cultural trauma of an ordinary man is visible as a permanent ambivalence and oscillation. It points to the never-ending stumbling from guilt to suffering and back; to the discontent following from not having one overarching narrative which would safely redeem the ordinary people as innocent victims.

## <A>Conclusion

As we argued in the introduction, the post-socialist collective memory of the state-socialist past does not lend itself easily to one principle. The statements of the participants in the focus groups reinforce our notion of the complexity of remembrance. In virtually all the cases, the kind of remembrance that was stimulated by viewing and discussing clips from the *Vyprávěj* television serial reminds us of a memory prosumption process that appears to be more of a patchwork of personal needs and textual offerings rather than a single mnemonic practice.

Nostalgic renditions of the past were commonly observed. Their manifestations were often explicit, as when the older discussants acknowledged a sense of longing for the past, although they would clearly define the desired past in terms of childhood and memories of the family and avoid the political context. The existing theories of nostalgia seem to be correct in the sense that nostalgic remembrance did not seem to engage a deeper sense of historicity of either state socialism or private capitalism, nor did it inspire an appeal to change history’s course. The nostalgia did appear ‘reflective,’ but less in a sense attached to it by Svetlana

Boym, i.e. a type of nostalgia "more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude" (Boym 2001, 49). The viewers quite simply exhibited awareness of the nostalgic sentiment in their recollections by spelling out the bygone nature of the past in question; so perhaps we could speak more precisely of a case of 'reflected' nostalgia. Furthermore, the analysis of relevant statements supports the claims that nostalgia adheres to commodified kitsch and stereotypes, as they tend to be elicited by the less abstract retro-signifiers.

Nostalgic discourse itself does point to aspects of the past over which our discussants express a sense of loss. We deem the ado about the post-socialist nostalgia to stem from the (disrupted) continuity of collective memory and (eroded) integrity of everyday life. In this light, nostalgia is just one of the secondary reactions to a primary distress: it is as though an excess of official memory and historiography (Hladík 2009) results in the 'lack' of everyday memory. The moralizing mode of discourse appears to be an intermediary position, a moment of reflection on nostalgia as well as a precursor to the dilemma of assigning guilt in traumatized remembrance. If some scholars see post-socialist popular culture of remembrance as a space for people 'without a story,' we tend to see it as space of many stories, private and collective ones, for which the narrators seek a forum. Their trauma is truly cultural—not traceable to an essential event, not stimulated by experienced horrors, not even reducible to economic distress—in that it stems from the impossibility of seamlessly integrating the past with the present by means of acceptable narratives. To the extent that serials such as *Vyprávěj* bear witness to these unrecognized stories, they have a therapeutic element and perhaps even political ramifications. However, there seems to be no prescription for a proper type of remembrance, no easy exit out of post-socialism.

Our research has confirmed the relevance of popular television in the formation of collective memory and showed that the medium's mnemonic dimension has a particular role

to play in the context of a post-socialist country like the Czech Republic. We followed the discourse of viewers of the television serial of mixed genres, and found that the way in which they articulate singular forms of remembrance, such as its traumatized or nostalgic type, turns them into complex negotiation of the meaning of the state-socialist past.

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<A>Notes:

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[i] By tokens of an authentic socialist culture we refer to material objects or imaterial images that were produced or used in the past and preserved to the present day not only in official archives and museums but also by informal ways of storage in people's households, etc. This can be e.g, clothing, furniture, do-it-yourself objects or television shows produced before 1989. Indexical signs of the past hardly stand by themselves; they are usually parts of bigger wholes of symbolic nature. It can be e.g. the case of particular authentic object preserved from the past and used as a prop in the film. The typical example can be original labels of cans, bottles and other grocery products used in the film *Goodbye, Lenin!* (Germany 2003). "The appeal of the index" in creating an effect of historicity in visual representation is emphasized by Philip Rosen (2001, 127). He puts forward a distinction between "preservationist" and "restaurationist" positions, where the first one encompasses attempts to show the past through authentic, unmodified objects (in spite of their natural wear and imperfections) while the second one strives to aestheticize them by renovation (Rosen 2001, 52).

[ii] We are far from suggesting that all cultural traumas are dislocations or that dislocation is an underlying pattern in all segments of a particular cultural trauma. E.g. in case of natural disasters like tsunamis or earthquakes the discursive dislocatory function of the traumatic event is not so strong. Similarly, some other cultural traumas, e.g. the radical social changes (like the rule and collapse of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe), may be showing signs of discursive dislocation only in some of their segments whereas other segments are non-discursive in their substance (real casualities, human suffering, material damage…).

[iii] We facilitated the focus group debates by screening three video samples.
Sample 1 (S1) was taken from the episode one, *Od začátku – 1964* (*From the Beginning – Year 1964*). In this part, father Josef Dvořák is approached by the deputy of a factory council of the CP, Comrade Karpíšek, who hands him an application for the Communist Party membership. The father looks very sheepish and does not want his colleagues to spot the scene. Karpíšek subtly threatens him that a potential refusal may have an impact on his children's education opportunities in the future.
Sample 2 (S2) was taken from the episode 21, *MDŽ – 1973* (*International Women's Day – Year 1973*). In this part, there is an International Women's Day celebration at the father's workplace. He participates in it (after a separation with his wife, Jana Dvořáková) with his new girlfriend, Jarka. It turns out that Jarka (unlike Josef Dvořák and especially his mother, who also comes along) is an ardent supporter of the Communist Party line. As a surprise, she reads aloud a poem she personally wrote to celebrate the socialist womanhood.
Sample 3 (S3) was taken out from the episode eight, *Velká očekávání – 1969* (*Grand Expectations – Year 1969*). In this part, there is a documentary footage used to recall the atmosphere of the Prague Spring in 1968 before and after the invasion of the Warsaw Pact military forces into Czechoslovakia. The feature film continues with the father's birthday party (prepared by his wife, Jana) which is interrupted by a radio announcement informing that Jan Palach, a university student from Prague, burned himself in protest on the main square in Prague as a living torch.

[iv] The first season aired from to August 31, 2009 to February 22, 2010 and had 26 episodes. The second season aired from September 9, 2010 to December 17, 2010 and had 16 episodes.

[v] The average share of the serial *Vyprávěj* was 32.38% of viewers. In 2010 CT1 (the channel which aired the show) had 18.74% of viewers as the total average share in primetime (Source: http://www.ato.cz/vysledky/rocni-data/share/15)

[vi] More details on the composition and organization of the focus groups are available from the authors upon request.

[vii] Philip Rosen dubs this process the Everett's Game. The inspiration for the term was a letter of complaint written to a film studio by certain Mr. Everett, who wished to point out a historical inaccuracy that he had noticed in a movie. The rule of the Everett's Game requires "that every detail of the film be gotten 'right' or else he [Mr. Everett] can assert a victory, consisting in a claim of knowledge of the detail superior to that of the film" (Rosen 2001, 156).

[viii] For a useful overview of the problem of 'historical character' in film and an appropriate typology, see the work of William Guynn. (Guynn 2006, 97ff.)

[ix] Pioneer Organization of Socialist Youth Union (PO SSM) was a communist youth organization in 1970–89.

[x] Gustáv Husák was the President of Czechoslovak Socialist Republic from 1975 until 1989.

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