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Imagining National Identity
in Czech Postcommunist Cinema

The article discusses the role of cinema in the construction of national identity in the Czech Republic after the fall of communism. It examines how filmmakers have used historical and contemporary themes to explore the complexities of the nation's past and present. The text analyzes the representation of the communist era and the subsequent transition to democracy, highlighting the challenges of reconciling the past with the future. It also touches upon the role of the state and the media in shaping national identity and the impact of globalization on the Czech cultural landscape.

The author, Petra Hanáková, is a scholar in the field of Czech studies and film studies. Her work focuses on the intersection of culture, politics, and history in the postcommunist era. The article is part of a larger volume that explores various aspects of the Czech Republic's development since 1989.

In the three years since the fall of the communist regimes, Eastern European cinema has been radically transformed. It has been largely divorced from the state, deprived not only of its means of support but also of its muse. That wicked stepmother of a state is dead, and there is no one left to say such cruel and clever things about. There's no more need for subterfuge, which, when it was mastered, had put East and Central European cinema on the map in the first place. The question now is whether the region's filmmakers will maintain their stature. Can they continue to produce such important films as *Ashes and Diamonds*, *The Red and the White*, or *Reconstitution*, while surviving in the new, market-driven economies? Given the setbacks it has suffered, the greatest achievement of East European cinema since 1989 is the fact that it exists at all. (Kornell 43)

Relating the social structure of a given time and place to the representation of that structure in film is one of the most tantalizing yet vexing tasks faced by the entire field of film historical study. (Allen and Gomery 158)

Unlike our Visegrad neighbors, Hungary and Poland, the critical and historical discourse on Czech and more broadly Czechoslovak film still have not produced any summarizing publication that would make the information on postcommunist cinema conveniently accessible to foreign readers.¹ And even the two book-length studies available in Czech – Jan Čulík's recent, bulky *Jací jsme: Česká společnost v hraném filmu devadesátých a nultých let* (What we are like: Czech society in feature film of the 1990s and 2000s) and Andrej Halada's *Český film devadesátých let. Od Tankového praporu ke Koljovi* (Czech film of the 1990s. From Tank

¹ Compare with Mazierska 2007 and the chapter on contemporary Hungarian cinema in Cunningham 2004. There are partial outlines of some films in Peter Hames's chapter "The ironies of history: the Czech experience" in Imre 2005. After the completion of this text, Hames published a thematic overview of Czech and Slovak cinema (see Hames 2009) but it again only glimpses the current developments in the cinema of transition.

Battalion to Kolya)² – clearly tamper with possible conceptual approaches that would organize the data from this period, but in the end present mostly only descriptive summarizations of the films' main themes and styles. It is as if the cinema of the transition period defies conceptualization and apprehension, and as if the well-known Polish saying "it is as difficult to understand as a Czech film" came in our times to haunt the reflection of Czech cinema itself.

The existing important volumes on the history and style of Czechoslovak cinema published in English have mostly approached it from the position of high modernism – focusing mainly on the New Wave or on the work of exceptional auteurs (chiefly Jan Švankmajer) as the unequaled apexes in the development of film-qua-art.³ To be honest, from this perspective there is really not much left that could be considered important and researchable, since throughout the majority of its history, the Czech(oslovak) film industry has been either pragmatically centered around mainstream, commercial, and escapist production, or governed by the political imperatives and stylistic dictates of the centralized socialist film industry. Still, the fact that this prevalent double focus produced mainly inconsistent, stylistically impaired, or downright half-baked films should not stop us from studying them as, among other things, indexes of their time and place.

At the same time, Czech(oslovak) film has in the last few decades also been repeatedly compartmentalized under several utilitarian, at times overlapping configurations or umbrellas. Most often, it has

² Although his book is called "Czech cinema of the 1990s," Halada deals only with selected films from the period from 1991 to 1996, his account culminating with *Kolja* (Kolya, 1996). Čulík basically offers summaries and thematic analyses of most of the films from the period, broadly organized into several thematic categories.

³ I am referring here once again to the unrivaled work of Peter Hames, whose *Czechoslovak New Wave* together with his study of Švankmajer still remain the foundation blocks for any international study of Czech cinema (Hames 2005 and 2008).

been dealt with as belonging to a family that is designated by various competing labels, such as "East European Cinemas," as well as "East Central European Cinemas," and the "Cinemas of Central Europe," and even by the space-saving "CEE cinema" (Imre 2005, Jordanova 2003, Hames 2004, Wayne 2002, respectively.)⁴ In the second case, Dina Jordanova simultaneously metaphorically removes the "East Central European Cinemas" one step further, relating them to the sphere of the "Other Europe" (Jordanova 2003). Another useful framework has been recently suggested that deals with Eastern/Central European cinemas as belonging to the concept of the Second World that is supposedly "disappearing from sight," both politically and culturally (Marcziniak xvi), a fact that is actually evidenced by the absence of the Eastern/Central European region in most publications on the current "European cinema," which for many authors apparently comprises only Western and Southern European cinemas.⁵ As terms circulate, more and more plausible frameworks appear, as for example the geo-economic rubric of the "cinema of small nations," although the recently published volume utilizing this label does not in fact deal with either the Czech or the Slovak Republic. At this point, it is also necessary to add that the current, newly conceived placement of Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, and Polish cinemas under

⁴ Note that the Czechs vigorously oppose being labeled "Eastern European" and insist on being considered "Central European." This is most typically reflected in the writings of Milan Kundera: "I am always shocked by the perfidious vocabulary that has transformed Central Europe into the East. Central Europe represents the destiny of the West, in concentrated form." (Kundera 1982: 29). Compare also with Joseph Brodsky's refusal to use the expression "Eastern Europe" and his preference for the invented and paradoxical label "West Asia" (Milosz 1986: 101).

⁵ We could start to play a game here just for our CEE amusement and begin making up titles that would specify this – relocating Germany into West Central European cinema, Austria to West Central Eastern European Cinema, France into West South European Cinema, etc. I propose such a game only as a way to illustrate how nonsensical (i.e. "West Asian") the old geopolitical denominations are in present times.

the grouping of Visegrad cinema (as it appears not only in this volume, but also in various lecture series and at several recent film festivals) is not due to a re-discovery of some thus far neglected cultural formation within the Eastern Bloc, but a direct result of the praiseworthy institutional and financial support of the Visegrad fund which fosters these projects.

What is at stake in all these (re)locations is essentially to put these particular, and by definition regional, cinematic productions back on the map of European or World cinema. Although such mappings are often achieved by means of sweeping generalizations and indispensable simplifications, this is a price that regional cinemas are generally willing to pay in order to receive at least some attention from foreign reviewers, critics, and historians. Within this process, several questions continually resurface: how to write about national cinemas in a time of transnational or even global visual culture? And, how to put the films of these regions back on the highly selective and partial map? In many ways, the national remains the framework that is most commonly used to conceptualize both our own and foreign cinema, despite its tendency to disqualify certain productions as uninteresting marginal phenomena. This text tries to offer some useful basic patterns of understanding that will hopefully illuminate possible ways of reading Czech national cinema in a time of transition, which like all transitional periods is loaded with inconsistencies and paradoxes.

Tentative Frameworks: Invented Nations and Emotional Atavism

Czech films, especially those made in the period of the so called "transition" after 1989, often appear to the foreign spectators as hardly intelligible, containing obscure historical and cultural references and presenting a bizarre combination of stylistic and generic configurations. At the same time, there is a shared

sense that these films offer a unique view of a society in transformation, that they reflect this society's resurgent compulsion to create images of its own past and present with the intent to provide a coherent, at times didactic and logically self-serving representation of the national history and tradition. The newly "liberated" Czech(oslovak) cinema after 1989⁶ can be read either as an industry in search of new economic, aesthetic, and thematic models, or as a mode of cultural production relentlessly trying to define and re-define (and at the same time valorize and re-valorize) the most characteristic features of Czech national identity.⁷ Czech cinema since the 1990s can be approached as a symptomatic "art of transition"; and it also offers highly suggestive material for a critical analysis of the national self-image. We are in need of methods and approaches that will help us to connect films as cultural products to the culture they represent and will allow us to approach them as "indexes" of representational practices that communicate the hopes as well as the traumas of the given culture. Thus, films need no longer be reduced to being either a simple source of entertainment or examples of artistic success or failure, but can be read as "artifacts of culture" in both the artistic and anthropological sense of the phrase.

In her book *Cinema of the Other Europe*, Dina Iordanova has provided several useful coordinates for understanding the central issues in (the presumably generalizable) East European cinema. In her view, East European cinema focuses predominantly on in-

dividuals and their relation to society by concerning itself with "the interplay between historical and social processes and the personal experience of these processes" (Iordanova 44). In these encounters between the personal and the public, "identity issues and existential insecurities played out" in such a way that the protagonists are primarily "the vulnerable and the powerless, the small and the weak, the pawns and the underdogs ... with the overpowering consciousness of their limitations" (Iordanova 43). She interprets this concentration on the little people - whose stories are not narratives of success and forcefulness, but rather of failure, resignation, and compromise - as a direct effect of the national and historical experience that separates the "big" nations (and states) from the "small" ones.⁸ The difference in narrative focus and character profiles distinguishes the stories of the self-confident, big national cinemas from the storylines typical for small nations. This phenomenon is generated by the specific historical condition of the small countries, which are "usually powerless to make developmental decisions" and in general simply react to the political pressures and cultural whims of the more powerful countries wielding hegemonic power over them: there are "no uplifting imperial conquests, no triumphing over new lands or ruling over new peoples," and the East European nations are understood as historically conquered and ruled, "satellized," and culturally colonized (Iordanova 43).

For the current analysis, the most important aspect offered by Iordanova's framework is the way that it foregrounds history, or more precisely, the collective abilities to recall or imagine historical experience and utilize it as a source for fictional representations of the current society and national body. This condition-

⁸ Note that Iordanova does not offer here any definition of a "small nation" and that Poland problematizes this label already by virtue of the sheer size of its population of almost 40 million.

⁶ The transformation of the state controlled "nationalized" cinema into the standard "capitalist" model of film production occurred mostly during the years 1990 and 1991, but it was only officially affirmed a few years later by the "Legislative Act 273 of 15th of October 1993 on Some Conditions of Production, Dissemination and Filing of Audio-Visual Works, on Changes and Amendments of Acts and Other Legislation." By the time this act was approved, Czechoslovakia had legally split into the Czech and Slovak Republics, effective 1 January 1993.

⁷ For a basic overview of the developments after 1989 with respect to earlier periods, see the two survey articles by Voráč and Přádná.

ing and saturation of the image with history can be further specified with the aid of two useful concepts - namely imagined community and active atavism. First, the notion of the imaginary or imagined community (in Benedict Anderson's terms, and as expanded by Arjun Appadurai in his understanding of imagination as social practice⁹) is more than pertinent here, given the project-based and constructed nature of Czech nationality as the realized ideal of the Revival movement of the 19th century. In this way, Czech identity can be read as a creation of one of the well-documented "laboratories of nationhood" - the availability of documents and records from the Revival period allows us to literally trace the history of the creation and invention of the nation all the way back to the Revivalist's salons, and kitchens, so to speak. This possibility grants us several productive concepts for analysis, such as the notion of the "periods of accelerated development" with their idiosyncratic types of literary and cultural production (Macura 1995).¹⁰ Within the proposed framework, history is not perceived by its subjects (i.e. the individuals forming the nation) as a chronologized set of data and events to be remembered, organized, and rationally assessed; on the contrary, the nature of history is cyclical, necessarily phantasmatic and above all, deeply emotionally charged. This emotionality has already been noted by Anderson as a characteristic of modern nationalism, when he suggests that to un-

⁹ "The world we live in today is characterised by a new role for the imagination in social life. To grasp this new role, we need to bring together: the old idea of images, especially mechanically produced images (in the Frankfurt School sense; the idea of the imagined community (in Anderson's sense); and the French idea of the imaginary (*imaginaire*) as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations, which is no more and no less real than the collective representations of Emile Durkheim, now mediated through the complex prism of modern media." (Appadurai 4-5)

¹⁰ I have tried to show how this concept can be applied to understanding the hybrid and impure forms of certain periods (in this case the crazy hybrid comedy) in Hanáková 2008. For more on the Revival and its relation to nationalism, see the work of eminent Czech political theorist Miroslav Hroch.

derstand nationality, nation-ness and nationalism "we have to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound *emotional legitimacy*" (Anderson 1991: 4, emphasis mine).

In a similar vein, Iordanova quotes the Hungarian art historian Lóránd Hegyi, who specifically attributes the "emotionally charged nature of history" to Eastern European nations (Iordanova 44). This emotionality does not just produce historicism, but also leads to our second useful concept, "active atavism" (Pynsent),¹¹ a cyclical pattern of invention and return to (necessarily imagined) points of history as models and even didactic imperatives of the present. Active atavism is "a device which seems to be inherent in Central and East European nationalisms... By active atavism I mean a seeking out and even inventing of ancestors and ancestral characteristics. It consists in deriving remote history from the present, rather than deriving the present from history" (Pynsent 1994: 59). Stated another way, here the "past only functions as confirmation of present prejudices" (Berger, Eriksonas, and Mycock 2). "History" is thus employed as an adjustable repository of images and symbols: "There exists a widespread though tacit assumption that the past is a *limitless and plastic symbolic resource*, infinitely susceptible to the whims of contemporary interest and the distortions of contemporary ideology" (Appadurai 1981: 201, emphasis mine).

At this point, I would like to flesh these concepts out with the help of at least one example. One of the first transformation films, Jan Svěrák's *Obecná škola*

¹¹ Pynsent reminds us, that "Benedict Anderson writes of active atavism ... that 'atavistic fantasizing [was] characteristic of most nationalist thought after the 1820s; he suggests that 'antiquity,' that is, assertions of antiquity derived from the present ... might be 'the necessary consequence of novelty', the novelty of the 'changed form of consciousness' involved in awareness of nation-ness." (Pynsent 1998: 280)

(*Elementary School*, 1991), was marketed under the playful slogan "sweet Czech cheerful movie - acoustic, colorful, inflammable." Besides presenting the coming of age story of its main character (the boy Eda) and his unruly classmates, the film also depicts the coming of age of the Czech nation. Set during a historical crossroads (immediately after World War II, during the brief years before the communists' seizure of power), the disobedient class of boys is taught and educated how to be citizens and subjects of their nation. Their teacher, Hnízdo, is the active atavist and Revivalist *par excellence* - evoking the great figures of history not as examples of historical behaviors and decisions that must be somehow modified if they are to be applied to current context, but as the heroes of melodramatic and histrionic accounts that are supposed to be adopted and incorporated into the current national body.

In one of the central and most loaded scenes of the film, Hnízdo communicates the history of the 15th century religious reformer Jan Hus by means of a nationalistic Revivalist song. As the teacher sings in his unschooled voice and with an instrumental accompaniment that betrays him as a not very advanced violin player, the camera pans across the faces of the listening boys, who at the beginning of the film did not respect anything and anyone but now gradually start to sob and finally burst out crying heavily in a shared, overwhelming outburst of melodramatic sentiment.¹² The incommensurability between the amateurish performance with its simple revivalist rhetoric and the overpowering effect on the unruly boys not only demonstrates the profound national investment in history, but also sheds a self-reflective light on the didactic efforts of the film itself. In many ways, this is a truly

¹² The lyrics of the revivalist song are as follows: "Hranice vzplála, tam na břehu Rýna, na ní umírá dálně vlastní syn. ... A vy se ptáte, kdo v těch plamenech? Toť Mistr Jan, toť nejslavnější Čech. ("The stake blazed at the shores of the Rhine, on it the son of a distant land dies. ... And you ask, who is it in the flames? That's Master Jan, the greatest of all Czechs.")

Revivalist movie, a treatise on nationalist didacticism and a study of the processes in which the "Czech question" can and should be raised. (Unsurprisingly, this underlying "other story," which is in many respects more important than the line that follows the mischievous exploits of Eda and his friends, has been utterly overlooked and misunderstood by foreign critics, who read and judged the film only within the genre of "end of childhood" films¹³).

The discourse of the "Czech question" permeates the entire film - as both Hnízdo and Eda's father, Mr. Souček, constantly evoke (and offer solutions) to the debates that have, at least since the middle of the 19th century, punctuated the definition of Czech identity with a question mark. Likewise, both characters explore the historical role and function of the Czech nation within European and world history. The contrast between Hnízdo and Souček is the contrast between mythological heroism and everyday active citizenship, between the invented tradition of the nation and the continuous re-creation of the nation through daily work and political engagement. While Hnízdo invents a spectacular self-history, constructing himself as a heroic war soldier, in order to teach the boys about bravery and truths that are worth dying for, Mr. Souček with his more mundane interest in politics and desire to preserve the cultural heritage (as the most important national "weapon") is oriented towards the future, in which he envisions the nation to finally fulfill its "destiny" in Masarykian terms - with the Czechoslovak state forming the bridge between East and West and serving as a point of translation between Eastern emotionality and Western rationality.

¹³ Compare this assessment with quotes from two American reviews, which focus more on the personal nostalgia and the "blandness" of the story: "A memory focus of school days just after World War II, in Czechoslovakia; it's nostalgic for both a time and a country that no longer exist" (Ebert) and "The movie's sole virtue is that it's inoffensive" (Hinson).

The attempt to at least marginally ask or answer the question of what it means to be a Czech is peculiarly present in the mainstream cinema of the transitional era. It is as if this period, in which "time draws the curtain and changes the whole world" (to borrow a line from a revolutionary poem by the 19th century poet Jan Neruda) should somehow revive and give actuality to the question of national identity, despite (or maybe because of) the gradually more and more globalized market and altered function of cinema. In many ways, Czech cinema's reliance on narratives of national identity, its abundant references to specific historical and cultural situations, and its recurring concern with national traumas and mythologies render it less competitive on the global market and less intelligible by the global public - yet this does not seem to concern most filmmakers and critics, or filmgoers, for that matter. Indeed, as box office results during the 1990s show, Czech films, even those with negative reviews, were able to attract numbers of spectators comparable to big US productions. In many ways, going to see a Czech film during this period can be interpreted almost as an act of patriotic duty.

In this context, the image of the national in relation to the personal evidently becomes a possible key for reading Czech transformation cinema. This brings us to the domain of social film history, as classically understood according to Kracauer's assertion that the films "of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way than other artistic media," because they are both a collective product and of a collective appeal to mass desires of mass audiences (Kracauer 4). For Kracauer, films picture "the peculiar mentality of a nation ... at a certain stage of its development," and reflect "not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions - those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness ... outer projections of inner urges" (Kracauer 6). As Allen and Gomery assert in their overview summarizing the position of Kracauer and his followers, this method still

stands as a major contribution to the study of national film cultures: "The popularity of film as a mass entertainment medium has prompted both film and social historians to regard the movies as a unique source of insight into national cultures" (Allen and Gomery 157), as reflections of "the desires, needs, fears, and aspirations of a society at a given time" (154).

Kracauer's psychologism verges at times on essentialism, especially when he goes on to analyze internal national dispositions as preexistent and merely resurfacing at certain periods with stronger intensity. This goes beyond the concept of movies as symptomatic, albeit varying social representations, and presupposes not only a shared national experience, but also something akin to an eternal historical spirit: "These collective dispositions gain momentum in cases of extreme political change. The dissolution of political systems results in decomposition of psychological systems, and in the ensuing turmoil traditional inner attitudes, now released, are bound to become conspicuous, whether they are challenged or endorsed" (Kracauer 9). Although I develop my analysis on the terrain first staked out by Kracauer and likewise focus on a body of thematic and visual motives as reflections and symptoms of certain national beliefs and attitudes in the period of radical change, I consciously strive to avoid the trap of presupposing a national soul and essence that can be recognized shining through the film print. Rather, I conceive of the nation here more as a process in the active sense, as *narration, imagining, or mythologization*, as the constant re-telling and re-inventing of a narrative structure based on canonical references, motifs and shared experiences, with undeniable and evident, often material effects on people, but still only a fictional, invented, and in many ways arbitrary formation.

It is important to remember at this point that the conception of film as the educator of the people and an influential source of national and political consciousness was propagated in the rhetoric of communist ideol-

logists all over the Socialist Bloc (it is implied already in the famous Lenin/Lunacharsky quote about film as the most important of all arts, that is, the ultimate art of political impact). Yet, this attitude also strangely persists well into the postsocialist period in the minds of some critics and reviewers. Jan Lukeš, the author of several summarizing studies on current Czech cinema, articulates in one of his texts what he sees as the most fundamental question of current criticism in the following words: "How do these film enrich the feeling of our national and human identity, in what ways are their spirit, ethics, and poetics important for our future?" (Lukeš 53). He responds to this question and outlines his credo (in highly nationally engaged terms) thus: "The goals and mission of Czech cinema are formulated as follows: to maintain the moral climate and the artistic values of Czech cinema, to return to tradition and order. The importance of the educational, didactic, and intellectual tradition should be taken for granted and should be held in respect" (Lukeš 1994: 49). This in many ways orthodox position can also be linked to the specific function of art in the history of the Czech struggle for sovereignty and cultural/national survival. In many ways, this historical fight was transposed in later periods into the task of the artist to function as the conscience of the nation. As Jiří Voráč states,

The Czech cultural tradition ... often preferred the social and educational function of art over its aesthetic function ... and attributed to Czech art, more precisely to Czech artists and intellectuals, the role of 'moral representation' which served as a substitute for the lacking political representation. Artists thus became not only creators of *objects d'art*, but also the spokespersons for articulating national and civic interests. Consequently, art as such fused its aesthetic dimension with its social and political dimension. (Voráč).

The Revivalist dogma that conceived of the artist as educator and ideologue of the nation smoothly blended both with the model of socialist ideologist and at the

same time and more organically with its opposite, the dissident guardian of independent culture. This dichotomy continues to survive into the transition era, a period when the rhetoric of "saving the nation" became topical once again.

The Warm and Cold Movies: Terms of Analysis

This preoccupation with the national resurfaces in the Czech cinema of the transformation period in two variants that correspond generally with two diverging cultural and historical approaches to representing national identity. On a very basic level, these approaches can be traced back to the 19th century, more specifically to the Revivalist tradition and to the later Decadent tradition. These tendencies are presently reflected in two main types of films that I have come to define (for reasons of pedagogical facility) as *warm* and *cold* movies. In the following, I aim to explain what exactly is meant by this distinction and how these two types of films relate to the historical tradition and images of the national.

The "warmness" of the first type of national narration is both metaphoric and literal. Most warm films are recognizable from the first shots by their feel – they are filmed in warm tones, use amber filters, and often feature opening sequences with idyllic, sun washed aerial shots of the countryside. Yet, more importantly, they employ a similar warmness in their approach to history, the representation of national identity, and the Czech question. Warm films focus on "little people" and present "the story of the nation" from within the niche of the nuclear family household – they use this setting to create the image of a small nation formed not by outstanding heroic figures and an educated elite, but by small, common people, who act as respectable citizens and naturally guard the national traditions. This is directly connected to the belief in the concept of a small, democratic nation formed from the bottom up by shrewd, sovereign citizens that have through-

out the centuries given rise to its "Great History" and "Great Culture" and endowed the country with a specific historical mission that has importance for the whole of Europe, if not the whole world. In this context, the Czechs are presented as a nation with a great potential for self-renewal (as the land of both the Hussite movement that revolutionized and democratized religion, and the National Revival that forged the nation anew from those remnants that managed to survive Germanization). This is the source of the patriotic and almost activist approach of those authors who praise the Czech's strength, inherent democratic character, "dove-like nature," and readiness to forgive all wrongs and any humiliation or injustice that they have suffered (this perception is rooted in the pervasive myth of peacefulness, which purports that the Czechs have only ever fought in order to protect themselves).

The most typical warm films are those made by Jan Svěrák in his early period, beginning with the above mentioned *Elementary School* and culminating with the Academy Award winning *Kolja* (1996).¹⁴ These two films feature sun-lit landscapes that create the feeling of being shot through a glass of beer – suggesting to the spectator that this is the "promised land," abounding in honey and brew.¹⁵ Both present the nation as the bearer of culture and claim the exclusive right guaranteed by the Czech tradition to relate the truth. This is

¹⁴ Another warm film made by the same director is *Jízda* (*The Ride*, 1994) – literally a "summer movie," abundant in beautiful golden shots of Southern Bohemia, which serve to illustrate the inventiveness and imagination of the protagonists who are unlimited by their evident financial constraints (again, we can read this as a metaphor for the nation that can use limited means for maximum effect).

¹⁵ It is fascinating how easily this image gets communicated to visitors from the West, horrified or charmed by the amount of beer drunk on every occasion – see this year's edition "Prague" of Anthony Bourdain's travel/food TV show *No Reservations*, which creates a similar image and even has its inter-titles inspired by the images of beer fermentation. Also note that some critics have condemned the Czech love for beer as plebeian, see Vladislav Effenberger's coining of the term "beerism" (Effenberger).

a formative myth, dating back to Hus's heritage (as the martyr that did not hesitate to die for truth) that was also taken up by Václav Havel as his political credo for the rebuilding of society after the Velvet Revolution into a society of "truth and love," in contrast to the socialist "society of lies" and political pretense.

Several Czech reviewers have made note of the national or even patriotic dimension of Svěrák's early films – and while some praise it as a primary value, other see it as a liability. Jan Lukeš, in tune with his afore-quoted critical credo, entitled his review of *Elementary School* simply "Czech Film," and reads the movie as a true patriotic achievement:

Nothing is so characteristic for this movie as its Czechness ... grounded ... in something unarticulated ... and latently connected to particular traditions of thought very much needed in our times... *Elementary School* is utterly Czech also in its historical and philosophical message: regarding our past from the distance of almost fifty years, it extracts from it significant knowledge for our present national situation but also returns to intellectual inspirations from the times before WWII, which can serve as a foothold... *Elementary School* is a commentary on the Czech fate in this century ... an elementary school of democracy ... if there will be more of such commentaries, it will make disappear the anxiety for the fate of this nation and state as well as the fear of the future of our cinema. (Lukeš 1993: 195–196)

Similarly, but from the opposite critical stance, Ondřej Štindl writes about *Kolja*: "this is more of a national than filmic achievement" (qtd. in Tippner 101). This transposition of the attention and critical judgments from the cinematographic to the national representation is a typical feature of the warm film reception and offers compelling material for reception study, which is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of the current essay.

If we are compelled to define the "essence" of the warm film, it would be: idyllic, congenial, inviting,

and, to use a very paradoxical word in this situation, *gemütlich*.¹⁶ It stages the space of Czechness as a cozy retreat, from which national energy and wisdom can be drawn, and which is historically unchanging and persisting. Yet at closer reading, this *Gemütlichkeit* can easily become *unheimlich*, or uncanny, as the warmth here is nothing more than phantasmatic screen veiling the actual situation of the country and its people. Groundbreaking and revealing in this respect is Anja Tippner's analysis of *Kolya* published in the Czech scholarly journal *Illuminace*, entitled "Kolya as Symptom: Ideology, Phantasma and Nation in the Film by Jan Svěrák." Tippner reads the film as a self-enclosed universe of pure ideology, which functions as a form of subjective and social self-defense against the traumatically experienced reality, in this case the reality of political and cultural transformation. The political is translated here into the homey sphere of the family and related to the process of maturing and assuming personal responsibility - this is done by employing the typical myths of an eternal and idyllic national space virtually untouched by socialism, and complete with classical music, an abundance of beer, and the intimate adventures of the Czech man. By re-inscribing the story of political transformation as a story of a maturing and gradually settling down philandering man, and showing his reconciliation with the political oppressor (here embodied and domesticated in the cute harmless Russian boy), the film succeeded in moving record numbers of spectators at home to tears and communicating this vision of the Czech history internationally - after it was awarded the Oscar for best foreign language film, *Kolya* became the most well-known recent Czech film worldwide.

¹⁶ Paradoxical because in the Czech language (unlike in English) this word still connotes the Biedermeier version of German bourgeois coziness that many Revivalists both hated and tried to emulate.

Similarly to Svěrák's films, the "historical trilogy" of Jan Hřebejk - namely *Pelišky* (*Cozy Dens*, 1998), *Musíme si pomáhat* (*Divided We Fall*, 1999) and *Pupendo* (2003) - tries to validate the positive features of Czech identity. Although not always immediately recognizable as warm in their color tone, these films paint very historically imprecise pictures of "what abnormal times do to normal people" and seek to offer justification for morally reprehensible acts and decisions. This moral relativism - a willingness to justify collaborative and pragmatic, self-serving behavior - again supports the image of the nation made of "good little people" who are only driven by the forces of history to act (presumably contrary to their "true" character) in ethically objectionable ways.

Whereas warm films paint the image of Czechness in the colors of beer and honey, cold films have rather the tone of ice-chilled vodka. Like their warm counterparts, they also aspire to create an image/metaphor of the nation, only here is it more negative - the disillusioned image of a decaying, self-devouring humanity. Such an attitude to Czechness can be traced back to the works of the Decadent movement from the turn of the century, which in direct opposition to the Revivalist discourse imagined the nation in a state of putrefaction, and talked about the Czechs as "worms in a puddle, long forgotten by the whole of Europe, the whole world" (see Pynsent 1994: 148). Rejecting any vision of "sweet Bohemia" and Biedermeier concepts of Czech pettiness, the Decadents particularly attacked the myth of the nation's "dove-like nature," which they read as cowardice and latent hostility combined with servility. For them, the "greatness" of the nation was nothing more than a delusion - a result of false optics and an unwillingness to face the world - and the decaying state of the nation clearly manifested itself in the aggressiveness of people towards each other.

The most prototypical cold film, Marek Najbrt's *Mistři* (*Champions*, 2003), takes us to an unspecified chronotope of a run-down village somewhere near the

German border (i.e. in the region formerly referred to as the Sudetenland), where a community of unemployed misfits passively hangs out in an improvised pub, investing in false delusions while aggressively exploiting each other's weak points. Echoes of the myth of the heroic nation resonate throughout the background as the hockey championship (which the Czech teams ultimately wins) is constantly playing on the old TV set. But, this investment in the moments of national victory in sports only provides an even a deeper contrast to the drab lives of the characters. The film also touches on the themes of the deep-rooted nationalistic hatred both towards the original German population and the local Gypsy minority. In many respects, *Champions* is closely linked to the "genre" of so-called "loser films" ("chcípácké filmy") typical for the first half of the 1990s, which picture the present reality through the defeatist optics of their passive, wretched protagonists - and thereby constituting further typical representatives of cold films.¹⁷ *Champions* literally transports us to the decadent "necropolis of the nation" (Pynsent 1994: 148) in its climactic final scene, in which the drunken main "heroes" doze off in a cemetery church, waking in the morning to wander dazedly through the forsaken graves of the expelled German population. Labeled in the press materials as a "politically incorrect film about illusions," *Champions* stages the scenes of destruction, aggression, and an absence of spirituality within this community of "outcasts of outcasts."

Made several years before *Champions*, Tomáš Vorel's *Kamenný most* (*The Stone Bridge*, 1996) is not only a staple example of the "loser" or "no-hoper" film, but also another prime example of a cold film. It is a story of the midlife crisis of film director Tomáš (who, in a clearly autobiographic gesture, possesses many characteristics of Vorel himself): he not only

suffers from despair and depression, but also gradually moves toward transposing these feelings into the writing a screenplay for what will be an obviously cold film. As the story proceeds, Tomáš succumbs more and more to the undefined and ambivalent mystique of the Stone Bridge (i.e. the Charles Bridge), built during the most cosmopolitan and "globalized" period of Czech history by the King and Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV. Yet, the allure of the bridge here stretches further back in history, connecting with the presumed pagan and shamanistic heritage of the neighboring Lesser Town. Although Tomáš's return to the energy of the place is a return to history, it remains in some ways pre-historic, or, to be more precise, to a time that predates the history of the modern Czech nation. In many ways, this is a return that obliterates any national definition or self-definition, and connects with an ahistorical, magical, sacred spirit, which is surreal and psychedelic, but definitely not emotional or sentimental, and does not at all lend itself as proof of the historical power and strength of the Czech self-recreating and self educating national entity. The film is shot alternately in strangely intensified, "sinister" sepia and in the bluish tint that is a staple of cold films - a combination that further contributes to the unsoothing spectator experience.

In the most intense scenes of the film, the protagonist is confronted with his father, also a deeply asocial artist and alcoholic - in many respects an older version of Tomáš himself. On one of their drinking sprees, the father preaches to Tomáš how the real magic of the Old Town only appeared during the bleakest times of the communist era, as "people holed up in their homes and everything was just left to crumble." Although most of the time Tomáš looks at his father with a mixture of disgust and admiration, they both share rather similar outlook on the nation - both see it as composed of cowards ("we are always scared, as our gramps already were"), obsessed with kitch and consumerism, and a nation that has forsaken its artists, who were

¹⁷ I have described this phenomenon in more detail in Hanáková 2005.



Cold Images / Warm Images:
Mistři (*Champions*, 2000) Marek Najbrt / *Obecná škola* (*Elementary School*, 1991), Jan Svěrák



Decadent / Revivalist:
Kamenný most (*The Stone Bridge*, 1996), Tomáš Vorel / *Obecná škola* (*Elementary School*, 1991), Jan Svěrák

traditionally its wardens. They figuratively communicate their attitude at the end of this drunken scene, when they climb up to the roof of one of the houses in the Old Town and urinate on the city bellow, against the skyline of hundred-spined Prague – the “mother-city” – to the accompanying sound of church bells.

Most of the other people that Tomáš meets are ruthless pragmatics and vultures, with the exception of the two main women of his life, his mother and his wife, who are depicted as hysterical victims of male irresponsibility. Standing in stark contrast is his wife’s suitor, Robert, who is nicknamed “Pinocchio.” As the owner of advertising agency, Robert always adopts a “cool” and positive attitude (his catch phrase is “no problem”) and is pictured exactly one of the nation’s grave-diggers: making large sums of money from cheesy commercials and dreaming about making “a big movie, one that stands a chance abroad” – the very notion of a “big movie,” connoting a film that is ahistorical and in many ways antinational, represents the direct opposite of the typical “small” Czech film. Robert’s persistent hyperactive behavior contrasts starkly with Tomáš’s reluctance to create (“Why create?” he asks in one surreal scene, in which he meets with president Havel, himself an artist originally, who urges him to “create” before Tomáš himself “becomes president”). But, ultimately it is none other than Robert who triggers the self-reflective energy of Tomáš’s film – by urging Tomáš to write and providing the funding for his film (as a means of “buying out” his wife, we might infer). At this point, we are given the peculiar chance not only to watch the process involved in writing the very film that we are watching, but also to see it through the prism of Robert’s comments on the evolving screenplay. He continually criticizes the script for its negativity and murkiness that will not capture the spectators’ interest, and accuses Tomáš of meanness and showing only the worst side of people. This is an account of the process involved in the (for the diegesis unsuccessful) making of a cold film – yet,

as we are watching the very film that Tomáš sacrifices in the movie by beating up his sponsor (Robert) and returning to his family, we might begin to doubt the reliability of the narrative closing. Tomáš himself reaches a point of self-reflection at the end, as he comments on the fight scene in a voice-over, stating that “scenes of violence do not belong to Czech film” and that “Czech guys do not fight.” This is a strangely cyclical and self-reflective film, a narcissistic self-exploration that positions its protagonist/author in many ways against the nation.

As a brief coda, let me add a plausible third category to the “thermic” categorization of Czech cinema: the “cool film,” which constitutes the polished attempt at a “transnational feel,” purified of national traumas and aspirations. The typical authors of this type of films, Petr Zelenka and David Ondříček – especially in their most popular works *Samotáři* (*Loners*, 2000) and *Knoflíkáři* (*Buttoners*, 1997) – create a universe in which the national symbols do not communicate anything anymore. One of the main characters in *Loners*, who spends most of his time smoking pot (and not drinking the national drink, beer), does not recognize the melody of the national anthem when he hears it from TV – he just remarks, “Cool tune!” When riding in a taxi through the immediately recognizable Prague Old City he believes he is in Dubrovnik. At one point, he states “Czechs are mean, since they do not do enough pot,” in a conversation with his friend from the Balkans, who supposedly came to Prague not to look for history, but for UFOs. The heroes of cool films are not representatives of the nation, but belong to a worldwide generation that faces similar problems and absurdities.

In conclusion, let me emphasize that this is just a very brief introduction to one possible categorization of Czech cinema of the transitional period. Its categories are meant to remain rather open, providing more analytic fluidity than strict borderlines. Every warm film has a cold moment to it, and vice versa, but

most typically any film from the transformation period would provide at least some scenes analyzable along these lines. From the point of view of someone teaching Czech cinema to foreign students, this simple distinction significantly helps them to begin to understand and to overcome the initial (and understandable) feelings of confusion and alienation when confronted with these films. Furthermore, this differentiation is by no means exhaustive – naturally, there are films that fall outside these categories. Yet, I perceive it as a starting point for further analysis as well as a useful teaching tool, which is simple yet capable of opening students to more profound readings. It also provides a means, by which to teach Czech cinema as a game of recognition, leading students on an adventure – they might, for example, start the semester proclaiming “I do not get this at all” and finish it with a self-confident “Oh, this is just such a warm film pretending to be cold.”

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