The colours of socialism: visual nostalgia and retro aesthetics in Czech film and television

Veronika Pehe

To cite this article: Veronika Pehe (2015) The colours of socialism: visual nostalgia and retro aesthetics in Czech film and television, Canadian Slavonic Papers, 57:3-4, 239-253, DOI: 10.1080/00085006.2015.1090758

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2015.1090758

Published online: 03 Nov 2015.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 210

View related articles

View Crossmark data
The colours of socialism: visual nostalgia and retro aesthetics in Czech film and television

Veronika Pehe*

School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, London, UK

Since the end of the 1990s, post-socialist nostalgia has been a powerful trend in Czech film and television. This article focuses on the examples of Filip Renč’s 2001 musical comedy Rebelové (The Rebels) and the Czech television series Vyprávěj (Tell Me a Story, 2009–2013), which both portray the period around the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. Through an analysis of the visual style of the film and television series, as well as a discussion of the way the texts recontextualize the popular culture of the period they portray, the article proposes that Czech post-socialist nostalgia is more fruitfully viewed as “retro”, which is here differentiated from non-nostalgic depictions of socialism through a comparison with the mini-series Hořící keř (Burning Bush, directed by Agnieszka Holland, 2013). Although retro’s concern with surface and style can be interpreted as apolitical, the author argues that the political agenda of Czech retro texts needs to be understood by the ways they combine a fetishization of the aesthetic trappings of the period with a condemnation of the political system of the time.

Keywords: retro; socialism; Czech Republic; film; television; 1968

Retro: remembering without affect

Like other countries of the former Eastern Bloc, the Czech Republic has experienced a wave of nostalgia for the socialist period. The largest body of literature on any one specific national context of post-socialist nostalgia has focused on the fascination with the material culture of socialism in the former GDR, a phenomenon that has come to be known as “Ostalgie”. However, a fetishization of the design, symbols, fashions, and

*Email: veronika.pehe.10@ucl.ac.uk

© 2015 Canadian Association of Slavists
objects of everyday life can be seen across the region. In the Czech context, two manifestations of this nostalgia have been dominant: retrospective representations of socialism, whether in literature, on film, or on television; and the continued popularity of socialist-era popular culture, which, as Andrew Roberts suggests, is one of the specificities of Czech nostalgia. This article reflects upon the intersections of these two nostalgic modes by concentrating on the 2001 musical comedy Rebelové (The Rebels), directed by Filip Renč, and the television series Výpravěj (Tell Me a Story), produced by Dramedy Productions for Czech Television, the public television broadcaster, between 2009–2013.

The focus of this investigation is two-fold: on the one hand, I examine how retrospective representations of the past capitalize on the continued popularity of the popular culture of the socialist period, which they incorporate into their own nostalgic narratives as a means of authentication. At the same time, I will also discuss the visual strategies that these representations employ to recreate an image of the past. I suggest that the type of engagement with the past displayed in The Rebels and Tell Me a Story, rather than being understood through the established framework of post-socialist nostalgia, is more fruitfully designated “retro”. I use this term to identify a shift from the vocabularies associated with the nostalgia paradigm, with their emotional charge of loss and “longing for a home that no longer exists”, to describing a relationship with the socialist past entirely divorced from the concept of memory.

Ostalgie provides a useful comparative starting point for considering Czech nostalgia, as certain issues which bear directly upon the Czech case have been at the forefront of German debates, such as nostalgia’s focus on the everyday culture and practices of the socialist period, or the use of humour as a vehicle for dealing with the past. Here I would like to suggest that what is missing from the literature is a consideration of how this phenomenon intersects with discourses of postmodernism, both on the level of textual strategies and as a means of periodization. As a stylistic repertoire, postmodernism has been a feature of Czech literature since the 1990s, and can be found in the works of writers such as Michal Viewegh, Jáchym Topol, and Miloš Urban. As a designation for a particular historical moment, the postmodern arguably gained currency once again after 1989. As Peter Zusi suggests, “the confluence of cultural and historical currents in the 1990s gave postmodernism fresh impetus, as well as caché [sic], in post-socialist Europe right at the time when the term was losing its aura in Western Europe and the United States”. Irena Reiřová has been perhaps the only scholar to identify post-socialist nostalgia and its rise in a period that saw a confluence of a number of “post” prefixes as a specific manifestation of this wider trend that Zusi describes. This link between certain aspects of post-socialist nostalgia and postmodernism can be seen in particular in the aesthetic of retro.

I use the term “retro” to designate the type of nostalgia devoid of affect that Fredric Jameson has identified as symptomatic of postmodern culture. Replete with irony and concerned primarily with style and surface, retro, as Paul Grainge puts it, “borrows from the past without sentimentality, quotes from the past without longing, parodies the past without loss”. It thus ostensibly turns away from an engagement with the politics of the past, revelling instead in its aesthetic surface. Both of the texts under discussion here can be situated within the phenomenon of retro in that they contain a stylistic evocation of the past, while constructing seemingly apolitical narratives of the period. However, this apparent rejection of politics necessarily carries a political agenda of its own.

The two texts with which this article is concerned, The Rebels and Tell Me a Story, lend themselves to comparison as they share a number of themes, as well as a host of...
Both focus on the 1960s and the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which they present in a heavily visually stylized manner. *The Rebels* is a musical comedy that constructs its narrative around a pre-existing canon of 1960s songs, detailing the love stories that develop between three teenage girls and three young men who have deserted from military service. *Tell Me a Story*, on the other hand, is a soap opera which follows the stories of three generations of an “average” family from 1964 onwards.

Apart from a few specific moments, *The Rebels* and *Tell Me a Story* do not engage in a sentimental mobilization of memory, in the way that other representations of socialism have. Such sentimentality can be seen, for example, in *Kolya* (directed Jan Svěrák, 1996). The film is set in 1989, during the final months of the socialist regime—a period of which the majority of contemporary viewers would have had clear memories. The strong emotional charge of the film comes from its subject matter, which details the development of a tender bond between an ageing bachelor and his adopted son, the five-year-old Russian boy Kolya. The picture is narrated with an unobtrusive, kind-hearted humour, characteristic of the work of screenwriter Zdeněk Svěrák. The result is a predominantly benign portrayal of the period, reinforced on the visual level by the camera filter which envelopes the period setting, both physically and figuratively, in a golden glow.

The aim of *The Rebels* and *Tell Me a Story* is quite different. The evocation of sentiment becomes less of a factor in these texts, which represent periods that their creators did not necessarily experience at all, or only as children. This kind of generational exchange, in which the past is consumed through a pastiche of styles, lends itself to a retro reception. Retro is here understood not as a characteristic of representations or practices, but as a sensibility in relation to the past akin to Raymond Williams’s structure of feeling. Williams posits that a structure of feeling is a set of dominant perceptions and values in a particular generation which manifest themselves chiefly in the cultural production of a period. In this sense, retro as a structure of feeling can be viewed not only as a particular response to the socialist past shared across members of a generation that came of age at the very end of socialism or only after its demise, but also as an aesthetic inscribed in representations of the past produced by this generation. The concept of structure of feeling provides a loose enough framework to be able to speak about a general sensibility, without suggesting that such an attitude must necessarily be universally held by all members of a generation. Retro thus appeals not only to those for whom the objects, fashions, and music in these representations act as memory triggers; its lack of experiential investment in the period allows for precisely the kind of distance that facilitates irony and thus enables an appreciation of the playful and at times irreverent appropriation of the past in the film and TV series under discussion. The socialist past is figured through an overabundance of period markers, which represent the past, but do not aim to recreate it accurately.

Socialism is viewed through a double frame: on the one hand, these retrospective representations visually reconstruct the past; on the other hand, artefacts from the past—in particular, music—are brought into this reconstruction. These two complementary nostalgic strategies of retrospective reconstruction and the revisiting of period culture can thus be viewed as two regimes of memory, which Susannah Radstone and Katherine Hodgkin define as “the kinds of knowledge and power that are carried, in specific times and places, by particular discourses of memory.” Revisiting and recreating the period involves a mobilisation of two different kinds of knowledge: in the former, there is a negotiation of personal experience, whether first-hand or handed down; in the latter, on the other hand, the past is mediated through the producers’ vision juxtaposed with the
viewers’ expectations. Both of these strategies in The Rebels and Tell Me a Story are ultimately harnessed to the same agenda, that of generating a sense of cultural continuity between the socialist and post-socialist periods. This is significantly different from nostalgia, which involves a sense of break and rupture. For this reason, I propose retro, i.e. a particular postmodern form of nostalgia, as a term that takes into account the way in which this shift in the past is understood.

The past revisited and the past recreated: quality and continuity

Termed a “song-filled retro-film” (písničkový retrofilm), Reně’s garishly colourful musical partakes in a genre relatively uncommon in Czech film production. As Jan Čulík observes, the main purpose of The Rebels is to “create an entertaining framework” for a range of well-known 1960s pop songs. The narrative is constructed in such a way as to justify and accommodate this pre-existing canon of both original as well as Czech versions of English-language songs around the story of three teenage girls and three young men who have deserted from military service in the summer of 1968. Thus the film relies on a somewhat heavy-handed use of the “cue for a song” device, where something that occurs in the film’s diegesis warrants the inclusion of a musical number which bears no relation to the plot or characterization. The Rebels refers not only to these specific songs, but also to the 1960s Czechoslovak musical as a genre, and to the songs’ original transmission in the form of television songs (televizní písničky), the Czechoslovak precursor to the music video. The film is thus over-saturated with multi-layered references to popular culture of the 1960s. In particular, the numbers in the first half of the film follow a recurring format. A song will begin as a performance within the diegetic world of the film: for example, “Pátá” (Five o’clock) starts as a song sung as the school day ends, the students then bursting into a choreographed dance outside the school building. At a certain point, the action is transported into a studio space in an attempt to recreate the setting of the original television songs, with angular cardboard backgrounds and floating objects (although this time, the studio scenes are shot in colour, rather than in black and white).

Significantly though, not all of the numbers in the film feature period recordings: certain tracks were re-recorded by the film’s actors, while the rest were used in their original versions as performed by artists such as Josef Zíma, Waldemar Matuška, and Olympic. This mixing of original product and reconstruction is typical also of the visual strategy of both the film and the TV series. The camp visuals of the film make use of the aesthetic of retro-chic, which, as Raphael Samuel argues, “plays with the idea of the period look, while remaining determinedly of the here-and-now”. The Rebels updates the colour palette of the 1960s to give costumes a present-day appeal (Image 1). The visualisation of the past in Tell Me a Story is also less concerned with historical accuracy than with packaging the series in a visually attractive retro look. The vibrantly hued costumes, chic hairstyles, and bright make-up the characters wear are primarily designed to appeal to a contemporary audience. Hence the costumes often contain not only period polyester and other synthetic fibres, but also contemporary, higher-quality materials. Costume shapes and cuts also have a twenty-first century feel to them. For instance, in the first season, the main heroine of Tell Me a Story, Eva, wears a retro-print but attractively modern tight-fitting stretchy T-shirt, which emphasizes a contemporary rounded bust shape (Image 2). In an interview, the costume designer of the series, Libuše Pražáková, noted that this was a deliberate strategy in the visual packaging of Tell Me a Story: “in spite of my memories, I went in for more colours. The producers also asked me to try to achieve a close match between the clothing and
today’s fashions, so that young spectators would recognize themselves in it, just as in the music”. In this way, the visual style of both the series and the film not only reconstructs past looks, but also updates them for contemporary tastes.

The serial form of *Tell Me a Story*, with its long-run format of twenty-seven 50-minute episodes in the first season, necessarily incorporates a wider range of techniques for evoking the past than *The Rebels*. Like the film, however, the series also relies heavily on the pastiche of period markers. The series is structured around the interplay of large
historical and small personal events, here represented by four generations of the Dvořák family. In order to give their stories historical grounding, each episode is framed by two segments of archival footage, at times with a newly recorded voiceover commentary. This footage anchors each episode in contemporary political events, while also reminding viewers of period music, theatre, or film (the archival footage in episode seven, for instance, features clips from the production of Theatre Semafor with popular comedians Miroslav Šimek and Jiří Grossman). Kamil Čínátl observes the importance of media within the fictional world of the series: passing shots of television screens in the characters’ apartments frequently offer a glimpse of popular stars of the day, and scenes are often accompanied by period hits playing intradiegetically on the radio. The incorporation of historical pop-culture examples into the daily lives of the fictional protagonists serves to raise the credibility of the narrative of their everyday experiences. Visually stylized to a lesser degree than The Rebels, Tell Me a Story nevertheless features a plethora of period markers. The retro aesthetic of the series is manifest in this eclectic evocation of the past, where each episode contains multiple references to the period, such as music, posters, objects of everyday use, and informal practices such as obtaining under-the-counter goods.

As already noted, the musical aspects of The Rebels, which employs both old and new recordings, sit between periodization and contemporaneity, in much the same way as the visual style. These texts thus function, both visually and musically, as pastiche, selecting elements from certain precursors and models. By pastiche, I mean, following Richard Dyer, a recognizable form of imitation. As Dyer argues, “for [pastiche] to work, it needs to be ‘got’ as a pastiche. In this sense, it is an aspect of irony. This implies particular competencies on the part of the audiences”. This type of ironic recontextualization of an earlier corpus of popular culture is one of the key aspects of postmodern nostalgia. Inviting audiences to recognize cultural references can be a powerful tool for creating a multi-layered viewing community; that the period music used captured the attention of viewers is also shown on the discussion page of Tell Me a Story’s official website, where one of the most frequent types of posts sees users asking for details of songs that were played in various episodes. The key here is the kind of eclecticism with which the past is appropriated. In this sense, it is no surprise that representations such as The Rebels and Tell Me a Story occasionally resort to popular culture references that are anachronistic. Jan Čulík suggests that the focus on the personal stories of the characters in The Rebels depoliticizes the narrative of 1968, which forms the backdrop to the film, and in this way already anticipates the spirit of the 1970s and 1980s. Whether or not Čulík is correct in his assessment of the period of so-called Normalization as apolitical, his observation points to one of the central effects of the retro aesthetic, namely a blurring of chronology where markers of the past are exploited without regard for periodization.

While these representations would seem to participate in the kind of “wallow[ing] together in ‘anything goes’” defined as early as 1982 by Jean-François Lyotard as typical of “contemporary general culture”, the aesthetic project of The Rebels and Tell Me a Story differs from more demonstrably postmodern attempts at dealing with socialism such as the Russian film Stiliagi (Hipsters, directed by Valerii Todorovskii, 2008). Visually reminiscent of The Rebels with its loud colours, Todorovskii’s film is also a musical comedy, which returns to 1950s Moscow. However, the songs used are an indiscriminate pastiche, where the 1950s are musically figured in “anything goes” style “through a collage of musical numbers in which cult underground rock numbers from the eighties are put to original lyrics pertaining to the plot”. The Rebels and Tell Me a Story, despite not always respecting chronology, are much stricter in their use of music that can be
identified as belonging to the period the film and series represent. This is especially true of the first few episodes of *Tell Me a Story*, which feature a sub-plot revolving around the main protagonist Karel’s band, rehearsing the same catalogue of 1960s songs that featured in *The Rebels*. The repeated use of these particular songs suggests that they are not only part of a shared canon, but also assume the role of “quality” products here, thus acting as an authenticating mechanism for these representations. The fact that the soundtrack to *The Rebels* became the best-selling music album in the Czech Republic in 2001 suggests that the reintroduction and recontextualization of 1960s pop captured the imagination of a wide cross-generational audience.\(^{20}\)

A similar response to the popular culture of the socialist era was generated by the first post-socialist rescreening of the 1970s TV serial *Třicet případů majora Zemana* (The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman, Czechoslovak Television, 1974–1979), where certain sections of the audience saw the series as a well-crafted genre piece. Čulík offers a variation on this view in relation to *The Rebels*. While he is generally dismissive of post-1989 Czech film production, he nevertheless rates the music used in *The Rebels* highly: “The popular songs that the film brings back to the viewers were often remarkable works of art whose genuinely poetic texts were profoundly metaphorical”.\(^{21}\) The press reception of *The Rebels* also focused on the quality of the music.\(^{22}\) Both of these responses suggest that the culture of the 1960s, associated as it is with a period of increased artistic freedom, holds a special place in this kind of “quality narrative” in the Czech context.

Alongside their common musical references, *The Rebels* and *Tell Me a Story* also share a similar political agenda. Both construct narratives that are primarily personal (love stories, family stories, etc.) and avoid and explicit portrayal of politics. The interactions of the teenage characters in *The Rebels* in the summer of 1968 are not in the least marked by political concerns. The institutional dimensions of living in socialism are represented only marginally, and until the portrayal of the August invasion, only a few hints suggest that the otherwise timeless narrative of school-leaving and first love is set in socialist Czechoslovakia, rather than a generic 1960s fantasy world. The film sets politics aside by establishing a simple contract with the viewer: representatives of the regime are depicted as unequivocally bad, while the values of capitalism are wholeheartedly embraced. Such values are embodied for example by the heroine’s father, the first private entrepreneur in the region, or by the young deserters, who dream of emigrating to America. Such a binary mapping of values, however, constitutes a political interpretation of the period; in this way, the film reflects less the period it purports to represent than the politics of the time in which it was made. Films such as *The Rebels* re-evaluate the past in order to justify the present by selecting certain contemporary values, which are then retrospectively projected onto the past. Similarly, *Tell Me a Story* sets up a post-political framework. While the large number of characters express a broad range of political opinions, the main hero, Karel Dvořák, believes he knows best: he is above politics, since (as he puts it) the communists are not to be trusted, never were, and never will be. While the idealist dissident Tonda ends up in prison for his political activity, Karel’s obstinate rejection of politics even at the height of the Prague Spring is portrayed as the most efficient strategy for survival under socialism. When Tonda asks him during a canoeing holiday in the summer of 1968 what he thinks about the political situation, Karel happily replies, “We’re completely cut off from the world here, we know nothing” (*Image 3*).\(^{23}\) He waits patiently until the fourth season of the series, where the changes of 1989 retrospectively validate his view and he finally sets up his own company in a burst of newfound enterprising zeal. A seemingly apolitical
entrepreneur-in-waiting, Karel embodies the Czech national myth which harks back to the
democratic and market tradition of the First Republic, a tradition once suppressed by the
communists but now making a triumphal comeback. The series’ selection and reuse of
certain elements of socialist popular culture becomes a mechanism for incorporating the
socialist period into this larger narrative of continuity. This in turn enables everyday life
under socialism to be narrated in a way that suggests that Czechs never endorsed
communist ideology, even while living under it.

These representations thus project an anti-communist vision onto the past; the nostal-
gia of these texts lies not in the politics of the period, but rather in the narrative of
overcoming on which they rest. The two regimes of memory – retrospective reconstruc-
tion and the revisiting of period culture – co-exist here in a symbiotic relationship. On the
one hand, the retrospective frame uses the popular culture of the period as a means of
historical authentication. On the other hand, this popular culture is itself validated by its
incorporation into the retrospective frame with its anti-communist political message. It is
thus divested of its association with the politics of the period. Its perceived quality makes
the popular culture of the period something worth turning back to and bringing into the
present, which contributes to the narrative of continuity and progress from socialism into
post-socialism. As Činář notes in relation to Tell Me a Story, the past that the series
represents is not one that recedes into the distance, but rather one that is “still alive and
present in communicative memory”.24 Retro thus describes the kind of relation these
representations establish with the past as one devoid of nostalgic sentiments of loss,
because this past is not lost, but rather lives on in the present.

**Defining retro: small stories versus grand narratives**

The one common point where both The Rebels and Tell Me a Story move from what could
be termed a retro “mode” to a nostalgic “mood” is in the depiction of the Warsaw Pact
invasion in August 1968, a depiction which mobilizes a quite different emotional reper-
toire to the affectless retro I described earlier. Portraying the moment of what is generally
perceived as the greatest “national tragedy” in the second half of the twentieth century in
Czechoslovakia, these scenes mobilize sentiments of self-pity, generating feelings of loss
and victimhood. In The Rebels, which concludes with the heroine’s emigration in the
wake of the invasion, the bright colours, slapstick comedy, and postmodern pastiche of the
1960s songs give way to a much more sombre narrative. In an emotionally charged scene, the heroine, Tereza, passes through the main square of her hometown in a car, watching her fellow citizens trying to engage in dialogue with Warsaw Pact soldiers sitting on tanks, accompanied by the plaintive tones of Judita Čeřovská’s Czech-language cover of “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” Passing by her classmate Olda, who has been desperately in love with her throughout the film, she calls out to him as the car drives by; Olda’s face registers resignation and regret as Tereza’s car recedes into the distance. In a gesture of farewell and loss, he throws a stack of leaflets he has been handing out into the air; the camera captures them in slow motion as they fall to the ground. The music and the slowed-down pace in this scene create an elegiac tone, compounding several layers of loss through mourning the departure of a loved one, the departure from one’s country, and the end of the hopes associated with the Prague Spring (Image 4).

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

The ability of these scenes to generate affect is built on the notion of 1968 as forming a grand narrative, as opposed to the small, personal, and episodic stories which otherwise constitute the bulk of the narratives of The Rebels and Tell Me a Story. Writing about the revolutions of 1989, Tim Beasley-Murray proposes what he calls “a distinction between the low-key anecdote that illustrates the normal and the grand narrative or story of exceptional events and deeds”. Such a distinction can apply to the events of 1968 as well: by narrating a moment of exception, these representations can break out of the small
and the personal of the socialist everyday. In other words, to tell a “big” story, these representations make use of “big” emotions: Eva’s appeal to the Russian soldier’s conscience, or the gesture by Tereza’s teacher in a scene from *The Rebels*, in which she hurls a Czechoslovak flag over a Soviet tank, are no longer ordinary occurrences, but genuine heroic gestures.

Insofar as nostalgia as affect is generated, it is nostalgia for resistance against the regime. This is a nostalgia for a time when there was clearly something to fight against, a harking back to an era in which the moral universe was more clear-cut. In *The Rebels*, the viewer is led to sympathize with the deserting soldiers who mock the authorities, while the plot of *Tell Me a Story* is often structured around the small ways in which characters manage to outwit the system. In order for this nostalgia to function effectively, the viewer is placed automatically on the “right” side, together with the protagonists who drive the narrative and with small, petty gestures demonstrate their disagreement with the regime, thus exculpating themselves, and the community of viewers, of any complicity with the political establishment. In this sense, the viewer is also located in a privileged position, from which s/he may retrospectively evaluate the shortcomings of the period.

The depiction of the events of the Soviet invasion aside, *The Rebels* and *Tell Me a Story* largely operate as comedies. Socialism is ridiculed through a portrayal of the idiosyncrasies of the period (the comic embarrassment of participating in May Day Parades, or queuing overnight for a washing machine in *Tell Me a Story*) and its stylistic deficiencies (in *The Rebels*, Olda and his companions are clearly marked as comic characters through their particularly unfashionable polyester-blend outfits, as opposed to the retro-chic of the main protagonists). Through the use of comedy and a pastiche of period markers, these representations create a humorous, benign, and mostly unsentimental portrayal of the socialist past, which I have been grouping under the designation retro. However, not all Czech representations of socialism function in the same way. A number of visual representations of the past paint a more solemn picture, which is closer in its mood to the scenes of 1968 described above. A recent example is the HBO mini-series *Hořící keř* (Burning Bush, dir. Agnieszka Holland, 2013, released as a single film in the same year), which also deals with the period around 1968. A comparison of *The Rebels* and *Tell Me a Story* with this series will allow for a short reflection on what differentiates retro representations from a more dramatic mode.

Holland’s *Burning Bush* tells the story of lawyer Dagmar Burešová, who, in the aftermath of Jan Palach’s self-immolation in protest against the occupation of Czechoslovakia, takes up the defence of Palach’s family in a defamation case against communist politician Vilém Nový. Based on real events, the series makes a claim to historical accuracy and a more realistic and dramatic portrayal of the period than comedy can offer. In this respect, it appears far more ‘authentic’ than *The Rebels* and *Tell Me a Story*. *Burning Bush* takes as its subject matter not the everyday lives of ordinary characters and their personal relationships, but exceptional narratives of oppression, injustice, and heroism. As a result, *Burning Bush* does not participate in the same structure of feeling as retro. This difference is accentuated by the generational profiles of the people directly involved in making the film itself. The team behind *Burning Bush* was composed both of those born in the 1980s who had no direct experience of socialism, and of director Agnieszka Holland, who was an eye-witness to the events of 1968. Holland described the generic project of the makers of *Burning Bush* in the following way:
The writer and the young producers had been thinking that I was the only person who could do it because I experienced it. And at the same time I was an outsider and so I could look at the history without a sort of Czech complex. And by Czech complex they meant the aversion to talking seriously about the country’s problems. You know, “Let’s make it funny.” And the young people behind this film had grown tired of a culture that was turning everything into some kind of joke.27

Here, Holland sets Burning Bush directly in opposition to the comedic portrayal of socialism as found in The Rebels and Tell Me a Story. Instead, Burning Bush engages with different generic repertoires, such as the costume and court-room drama, which tend to take a more sober approach to the past. Holland’s comments reveal a sense of didactic responsibility the series assumes in portraying socialism, something that is not found in the discourse surrounding retro texts. The didactic ambitions of the series were consolidated by Burning Bush becoming part of the One World in Schools project, an educational initiative of the largest Czech NGO, People in Need, which developed a series of teaching materials relating to the film, available on their website.28

Visually, a muted colour palette in grays and browns is the main authenticating mechanism of Burning Bush: the “golden Sixties” have definitely disappeared with Palach’s act, to be replaced by the gray Seventies. The distinction to be made between the visual style of Burning Bush and retro is that the former is not, as Samuel has proposed, double-edged, using the period look to cater to contemporary tastes.29 The look of Burning Bush is undoubtedly attractive, but also decidedly dated – the fashions and styles of the film are not packaged to be consumed by a contemporary viewer, but to be enjoyed at a distance. The mini-series further uses black-and-white archival footage, in a manner similar to Tell Me a Story, as a way of ensuring its own authentication, splicing characters (also in black and white) into these period shots. The visual identity of the mini-series does not make its narrative inherently more authentic than The Rebels or Tell Me a Story, however; notions of authenticity are formed within a social and historical context,30 and Burning Bush caters to a widespread notion of socialism as a period of drabness and grayness.31

The high production values of Burning Bush were consolidated by the film’s international ambitions; the series was produced as a flagship transnational project by HBO Europe, which operates across the former Eastern Bloc. The series thus attempted to transcend the small, Czech stories told by retro comedies about socialism; it aspires to generate a broader, transnational, and therefore more universal appeal. Here we return to the portrayal of grand narratives in retro representations: where in episodically structured retro comedies such moments are scarce, the dramatic mode requires stories of genuine heroism that can sustain a large narrative arc. Burning Bush consciously presents heroic role models: apart from celebrating Palach’s act, it also narrates the story of a morally upright heroine, lawyer Burešová, who fights for justice even when she knows she does not stand a chance. Retro representations with their humorous overtones include a level of ironic detachment; conversely, dramatic and “authentic” representations of socialism lack an ironic dimension. Burning Bush does not shy away from harnessing the sentimental potential of its subject matter: the tragedy of one woman, Palach’s mother, as she discovers the news of her son’s death, becomes a shared tragedy as well as a glimmer of hope and a point of indignation for the whole nation, as the wide range of characters are all deeply struck by the event.
What I have identified as retro aligns loosely with Svetlana Boym’s “reflective nostalgia”, mainly through its key quality of irony. However, the attempt to create serious representations of the past which are moreover deemed accurate enough to be used as educational tools, thus positing their vision as a model interpretation of modern Czechoslovak history, is also reminiscent of the second narrative strand that Boym defines in her influential typology of nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia, Boym writes, “does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition”. Furthermore, Boym argues that the distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia “allows us to distinguish between national memory that is based on a single plot of national identity, and social memory, which consists of collective frameworks that mark but do not define the individual memory”. Through its educational ambitions, the authenticity narrative can be seen as a self-proclaimed guardian of “national memory” and identity, which is presented as inherently democratic and opposed to any kind of oppression. Burning Bush thus posits not socialism, but the First Republic, as an implicit object of nostalgia, where true Czech values were to be found: Burešová’s moral virtue and graciousness of manner and style point obliquely to her coming from a “good” First Republic family background.

The comparison of retro with Burning Bush brings out a differentiation of temporality: the dramatic mode poses a definite historical break with socialism – grand narratives happen in an altogether different past – whereas the episodic nature of retro can pick and choose moments and styles across a temporal continuum. This typology of Czech depictions of 1968 – the dramatic mode versus retro – underlines the fact that the notion of nostalgia, which is often applied as a blanket term to divergent memory practices in relation to socialism across the region, is not sufficient in describing the ways in which the past has been narrativized. In neither of these narrative modes is a sentimental longing for the period of socialism much in evidence. If anywhere, an emotional charge is present in moments of resistance against the regime, as the example of the reaction to 1968 in these representations demonstrates. But rather than nostalgia, retro is a more appropriate term for the preoccupation with the aesthetic exploitation of everyday socialism in texts such as The Rebels and Tell Me a Story, and this tendency can be seen in a number of visual representations which deal not only with 1968, but also with the ensuing period of so-called Normalization.

If retro is a postmodern phenomenon, then it may seem somewhat incongruous for us to argue that the linear narrative of progress can be such a powerful tool for representing the past in this mode, since discussions of postmodernism have often focused on its sense of temporal levelling or depthlessness. However, as Zusi points out, the renewed interest in postmodernism in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 played into “at least one major strand of postmodernism [which] involved the return to a historical sense as a corrective to the excesses of the high modernist or avant-gardist temporal paradigm”. I have suggested that the use of period popular culture in retrospective representations establishes a narrative of cultural continuity between the socialist and post-socialist periods, and this continuity projects such a historical sense. Because retro eschews a feeling of a definite historical break between socialism and post-socialism, it makes all culture of the socialist period equally accessible, equally available for pastiche. Retro representations thus construct a triumphalist narrative of progress from socialism into post-socialism, where the present political order is seen as the culmination of a trajectory of Czech history from which it is possible to turn back to exploit the aesthetics of the past at will. Czech retro thus confirms the status quo, which demonstrates a strong anti-communist sentiment.
Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes
1. See, for example, Cooke, “Good Bye, Lenin!”; Blum, “Remaking the East German Past”; Berdahl, “(N)Ostalgie’ for the Present.”
2. For a comprehensive survey of various material nostalgic practices across former socialist countries, see Velikonja, “Lost in Transition.”
7. Grainge, Monochrome Memories, 55.
8. The producer of the series, Filip Bobiňský, summarized this in the following way: “They [the characters] are not committed communists, nor do they fight against the regime, instead they live their everyday lives in such ways as were possible at the time”. Quoted in Hejdová, “Vyprávěj: Chystaný rodinný seriál České televise.” All translations from Czech are my own.
10. The concept of structure of feeling has been employed in a similar fashion by Ekaterina Kalinina in her discussion of post-Soviet nostalgia. However, as nostalgia for socialism in the Czech context has a range of manifestations with different generational dimensions, the author finds the concept more applicable to the narrower designation of “retro” as a subset of post-socialist nostalgia. See Kalinina, Mediated Post-Soviet Nostalgia.
12. Čulík, “The Prague Spring.”
17. Čulík, “The Prague Spring.”
18. Lyotard, “Answering the Question.”
20. Vlasák, “Rebelové si přišli na svě.”
21. Čulík, A Society in Distress, 95.
22. See, for example, Krivánková, “Reně vystavěl pomník šedesátým létům”; Sedláček, “Rebelové”; Mišková, “S Rebely přichází smích, hudba i pláč.”
24. Činatl, Naše české minulosti, 158.
25. I refer to Paul Grainge’s terminology according to which “the nostalgia mood articulates a concept of experience”, while the nostalgia mode “articulates a concept of style, a representational effect with implications for our cultural experience of the past”. Grainge, Monochrome Memories, 21.
27. Sperling, “In Conversation.”
29. Samuel, Theatres of Memory, 83.
30. For more on constructing authenticity in representation, see Classen, “Balanced Truth,” 88.
31. The stereotype of socialism’s material universe, and in particular that of the period of “Normalization”, as gray, has been explored, for instance, in the 2013 play Gray Seventies (Šedá sedmdesátá) at Prague’s Theatre on the Balustrades, directed by Jan Mikulášek. For more on this popular conception, see “Vyprávěj: policejní režim s lidskou tváří.” Lidové noviny, October 30, 2010, where several commentators and journalists discuss the inauthenticity of the bright colour scheme of Tell Me a Story: http://www.lidovky.cz/tiskni.aspx?r=ln_noviny&c=A101030_000086_ln_noviny_sko.
A retro aesthetic in the depiction of “Normalization” has been employed in particular in the films of screenwriter Petr Jarchovský and director Jan Čejbejk. For example, Šakali léta (Jackal Years, 1993); Pelíšky (Cosy Dens, 1999); Pupendo (2003); for more recent films, see Ondřej Trojan’s Občanský průkaz (The Identity Card, 2010) and Richard Řeřicha’s Don’t Stop (2012).


Notes on contributor

Veronika Pehe is currently completing her PhD at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London. Previously, she studied Comparative Literature and Film Studies at King’s College London and University College London. Her current research concerns memory politics and representations of the socialist period in the Czech Republic and Germany.


