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Reframing Postsocialist Legacy and Imagery

Veronika Pehe, *Velvet Retro: Postsocialist Nostalgia and the Politics of Heroism in Czech Popular Culture* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2020).

Tanya Silverman (University of Michigan, USA)

Definitive moments of the "velvet" variety have shaped late twentieth-century Czech history, with the country's peaceful divorce from Slovakia in 1993 proceeding after the warless regime change of the former Czechoslovakia in 1989. Published about three decades after the Velvet Revolution, *Velvet Retro: Postsocialist Nostalgia and the Politics of Heroism in Czech Popular Culture* (2020) by Veronika Pehe traces the evolution in collective memory concerning the *ancien régime,* placing emphasis on the circumstances of softened, "velvet" attitudes that have iterated throughout the first twenty-five years after the end of socialism. Pehe's intervention in memory studies focuses on the forms of popular culture that have circulated among the Czech public impressions of issues such as heroism, resistance, and tensions between the personal and private spheres.

Pehe concentrates on the Czech postsocialist case to qualify Svetlana Boym's theoretical paradigms of "reflective nostalgia," which entails a balance of wistfulness and critical interpretation, and "restorative nostalgia," which yearns to reinstate an idealized past (8–9).[1] Pehe locates the "retro" notion in the center of the reflective-restorative dichotomy, arguing that "it is precisely such a dynamic of refusing the politics of the past while ironically taking pleasure in its aesthetics that constitutes the dominant mode of representing socialism in the Czech context" (9). Pehe distinguishes the Czech retro mode as separate from the East German *Ostalgie* that involves a longing for the prior political order and faith in its promises of earthly utopia (9). The temporally attentive chapters of *Velvet Retro* survey a wide variety of material and immaterial media from Czech popular culture: feature films, television series, literature, news reportage, art, consumer commodities, archival documents. Pehe's analysis accounts for transmutations in perspectives of the past as well as the political debates surrounding them.

The first chapter deals with the ways in which certain Czech cultural producers have expressed staunchly anticommunist stances within the post-1989 public discourse. Pehe argues that in comparison with politicians, people from artistic and intellectual circles have garnered more clout and visibility in promulgating this viewpoint. One such pertinent personality in this regard is Prague-based provocateur sculptor David Černý. In contemporary Prague, Černý and his works have become quite embedded, even normalized, throughout the cityscape, with his giant babies crawling the Žížkov TV tower and his kinetic Franz Kafka head spinning at regular intervals in the courtyard of the Quadrio shopping center. Pehe recalls a seminal moment of Černý's early career when he painted a Soviet Red

1) See also Svetlana Boym, "Nostalgia," *Atlas of Transformation,* 2011, http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/n/nostalgia/nostalgia-svetlana-boym.html.

Army tank monument pink in 1991. The pink tank prank signaled sweeping anticommunist messages against the Soviet socialist influences that had impacted the local history, implying a dismissal of the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia as well as the 1945 Soviet liberalization (35–37). Further examples of Černý's adversarial anticommunist tactics include his 2003 petition "One Does Not Speak to Communists," aimed at political elites, plus his design of a shirt emblazoned with "Fuck the KSČM" sported by Keith Richards that year for a Rolling Stones concert (38). While such broad and bold anticommunist messages have spread throughout Czech public arenas, in the realm of postsocialist popular media culture consumed by members of the public, there appears to be a more variegated, evolving treatment of the politics of the past, which the following chapters of *Velvet Retro* proceed to elucidate (41).

The second chapter shifts focus to popular narratives that present socialism using "velvet" techniques such as comedy, kitsch, and child narrators (46). Pehe points to the popularity of Michal Viewegh's novel *Bliss Was It in Bohemia* (Báječná léta pod psa; 1992), which reflects upon boyhood experience under socialism. The story carries a humorous tone shaped by its juxtaposition of generational perspectives: the innocent child protagonist detached from the gravity of the era's politics and the anxious adults who must grapple with them (51). While *Velvet Retro* does not dwell in too much detail on the film adaptation, also referred to in English as *Those Wonderful Years That Sucked* (Báječná léta pod psa; Petr Nikolaev, 1997), Pehe's observation about the gap between the elder and younger characters' viewpoints could very well apply to its comedy and levity. One popular Czech film that Pehe dwells on in this chapter is *Kolya* (Kolja; Jan Svěrák, 1996), which takes place around the Velvet Revolution and follows the sentimental story of a bonding between a Czech man and Russian boy whom he finds himself fostering by accident. Pehe remarks that the humor of the Oscar-winning *Kolya* functions alongside the film's prominent kitsch and emotive features (56–57).

The third chapter moves into the late 1990s and traces the responses to the persistence or reappearance of socialist-era television serials and entertainers. In view of the latter, Pehe brings up the semi-surprising, late-1990s comeback of Normalization-era disco singer Michal David to celebrate national hockey successes as well as the decades-long career continuity of pop star Karel Gott that survived censures of his reputation as a supporter of the former regime (66–67). Although public contentions arose due to Gott's televised sixtieth birthday in 1999 followed by his representation of the country at the World Fair EXPO 2000, as Pehe puts it, a respect for the "professionalism" attached to Gott's persona enabled him to ultimately transcend the problematic political associations (67–68, 70). Pehe's discussion about the durability of Gott's stardom and widespread acknowledgment of his decades-long professional accomplishments bring to mind the singer's brief cameo in *The Inheritance* (Dědictví aneb Kurvahošigutntág; Věra Chytilová, 1992). The *nouveau riche* redneck Bohuš, who prospers only thanks to money from a postsocialist restitution case, attempts in vain to treat Gott as an equal on the streets of Brno as he invites the singer for a drink. Pehe additionally draws attention to the fraught 1999 rebroadcasting of the Normalization-era series *The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman* (Třicet případů majora Zemana; Jiří Sequens, 1975–1980) about a police officer who righteously targets enemies of the state. To contextualize the show that propagated the former regime, Czech Television added to the screening of each episode documentaries that detail their historical circumstances (72). Like with Gott and his professionalism, Pehe identifies the perceived exceptional "quality" of the *Major Zeman* program as a justification for its rebroadcasting. Further, for younger audiences without direct experience of the former regime, *Major Zeman* could appeal as a "retro artifact" viewed through a lens of detached irony (75). Pehe develops her arguments about distance and cinema viewership in her analysis of *Cozy Dens* (Pelíšky; Jan Hřebejk, 2003), which takes place during the late 1960s. The widely popular film's

adolescent point of view and period-specific *mise en scène* of private spheres engender warm feelings that operate alongside an inherent assumption that the audience *a priori* disavows the political system, whose immediacy in memory had somewhat subsided (75, 78).

The fourth chapter centers on acts of "petty heroism" in postsocialist narratives whereby "ordinary" characters perform minor gestures to resist authority (84–85). Pehe traces this pattern throughout works of 2000s popular culture that depict the late socialist era of Normalization — which is often regarded as being eventless — such as the writings of Petr Šabach and Irena Dousková (85, 91–93). Previous chapters allude to such petty acts: in chapter three, for instance, Pehe mentions how a *paterfamilias* protagonist in *Cozy Dens* (based on Šabach's stories) yells with gusto from his balcony, "Proletariats of the world, go fuck yourselves!" (78). The fictional portrayal of little jabs against the system, however ineffective they may ultimately be, implies a reconciliatory nostalgia for the times of executing them (84–85).

In chapter five, Pehe explicates the theory of retro as a "memory regime" in which an appreciation for aesthetics of the past does not undermine a simultaneous disapproval of the associated politics (101). Pehe identifies the appeal of revitalized Czech socialist consumer products such as the trainers Botas 66 — whose erstwhile brick-and-mortar Prague storefront appears on the book's cover — as inspired by an appreciation for local design tradition that subdues negative notions about the products' implicit politics (105). Pehe then examines onscreen retro presentations of the musical feature film *Rebels* (Rebelové; Filip Renč, 2001) and soap opera *Tell Me a Story* (Vyprávěj; Biser Arichtev, 2009–2013), contending that "the political agenda… recedes into the background, as both representations construct narratives that are primarily personal" with communists as peripheral figures — until the 1968 Soviet invasion implements an "affective charge" into the narratives (111, 116).

Chapter six proceeds into the mid-2000s and assesses the opening of memory institutions coinciding with a shift in popular culture's telling of fictional postsocialist stories through more serious, dramatic methods. Pehe discusses the emergence of the state-sponsored Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů (Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, ÚSTR) and the issues that its mission and projects spurred (125–126). Disputes arose around the "totalitarian" label of ÚSTR applying to all regimes from 1938–1989 — i.e., incorporating the fascist governments of the Second World War along with all periods of socialism — signifying that "in the Czech public sphere… anticommunism was no longer as convenient a tool with which to demonstrate allegiance to the new elites as it was in the 1990s" (130). This chapter also stresses a concurrent "dramatic turn" in literary, cinematic, and televisual accounts of socialist history (130–131). Rather than embracing comedy and retro modes, works such as Tomáš Zmeškal's novel *Love Letter in Cuneiform* (Milostný dopis klínovým písmem; 2008) and Agnieszka Holland's mini-series about Jan Palach, *Burning Bush* (Hořící keř; 2013), take on a more solemn, critical view of the former regime. The "dramatic turn" feature film *Fair Play* (Andrea Sedláčková, 2014) (134, 141) is an apt example according to the logic of *Velvet Retro*. Taking place in 1983, *Fair Play* follows the young sprinter Anna who lives with her single mother, Irena. The actions and interactions of these heroines assume neither the "petty" nor the "velvet" effects described in the book's previous chapters: Anna faces pressures to use performance-enhancing drugs and emigrate while Irena riskily assists dissidents by typing up prohibited texts. Socialist-era aesthetics indeed inform the set design of interior and exterior spaces of *Fair Play*, yet the looming state surveillance and persistently anxious moods of the characters give the overall atmosphere a less cozy or nostalgic feel than in Hřebejk's *Cozy Dens*. In a similar vein, even the subsequent Hřebejk film *The Teacher* (Učitelka; 2016) takes on a less "retro" tenor compared to his *Cozy Dens* or *Pupendo*. Also set around 1983, *The Teacher* involves a Par-

ty-member educator in Bratislava who takes advantage of the professional connections of her pupils' families. Because this problem prompts the parents to decide whether to confront it publicly by signing a petition against the teacher and her excesses, the characters' direct challenge to the system differs from the prior pattern of petty gestures in private circumstances, not to mention the implications of nostalgia or conciliation for their performance.

Pehe additionally acknowledges in this chapter that not all postsocialist texts of Czech popular culture that deal with socialism fit the molds of the retro comedy or "dramatic turn" (143). She cites the example of the television series *Czech History* (České století; Robert Sedláček, 2013–2014) that aims to "demythologize and dehistoricize" historical actors by portraying them banally and imperfectly, for example, when Jan Patočka opens a pâté can while philosophizing over Charter 77 (144–145). These unheroic illustrations of the late socialist dissidents in *Czech Century* bring to mind the character Kocour (Tomcat) from the recent comedy *She Came at Night* (Přišla v noci; Jan Vejnar — Tomáš Pavlíček, 2023). A repressed dissident under the socialist regime, Kocour implicates a young Czech couple over his woes, inviting his wanton rock musician friends to take over (and trash) their nice Prague apartment that he contends they do not deserve. With that in mind, it appears that the irreverent facet found in the purview of "plural memory" Pehe describes persists through the present-day methods of reflecting upon the past and people's experiences of it.

Throughout *Velvet Retro,* Pehe compellingly intersperses claims about the "politics of heroism," pointing to various nuances from the relative rareness of victims-as-heroes narratives (32–33) in comparison to the "petty heroism" starting in the late 1990s up until the mid-2000s "dramatic turn" that encompassed anticommunist resistors in series, films, and literature (140). The textual case for "petty heroism" par excellence appears not in the fourth chapter entitled "Petty Heroism" but actually in the book's conclusion, which begins with a description of a scene from the film *Pupendo* (Jan Hřebejk, 2003) whereby the two male protagonists embed an anticommunist message into a wall, only to later remove it due to fear of its discovery (154–155). While Pehe's notion of "petty heroism" is convincing in accordance with her analysis of contemporaneous films with ordinary figures and minor rebellious gestures (e.g., *Kolya*, *Cozy Dens*), the book could have given acknowledgment to the "anti-hero" type in Czech narratives and elucidate why the "petty hero" would necessarily differ. While the identification of Švejk as the "precursor" petty hero certainly has value, does that idea challenge the rooted "anti-hero" assumptions about the Good Soldier and his ambiguous transgressions (92–93)? Does the petty hero add notable nuance to the inherently unheroic "small Czech" (*Čecháček*) or "simple Czech" male type,[2)] possibly due to the peculiarity of postsocialist circumstances in which he operates?

By and large, *Velvet Retro* contributes novel English-language scholarship on Normalization-era Czech television as well as novel contextualization of it. Martin Štoll and Paulina Bren have discussed in their books on Czechoslovak television history the controversial rebroadcasting of the Normalization-era *The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman.*[3)] Štoll's *Television and Totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia,* which traces the 1918–1989 history of Czechoslovak television alongside technological developments and political periods, describes *Major Zeman* as the most grandiose example of 1970s–1980s "exten-

2) Ewa Mazierska, *Masculinities in Polish, Czech and Slovak Cinema: Black Peters and Men of Marble* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 24–25.

3) Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 6; Martin Štoll, *Television and Totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia: From the First Democratic Republic to the Fall of Communism,* trans. Michaela Konárková (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 199–200.

sive projects" that venerated the Party's role in historical developments (199). That Štoll extends his succinct summary of *Major Zeman* to mention its problematic rebroadcasting that necessitated auxiliary documentary commentary (200) demonstrates that this element is important to the story of this show and its postsocialist legacy. Bren's *The Greengrocer and His TV* (2011) emphasizes the primacy of television as an intermediary between the public and private spheres during the Normalization era. It presents the postsocialist rebroadcast of *Major Zeman* and *The Woman Behind the Counter* (Žena za pultem; Jaroslav Dudek, 1977) as generating initial protest that gradually evolved into mass-produced banality as the shows became widely available on DVD format (25–26, 351). In addition to providing nuanced interpretations about the ironic and postmodern appeals *Major Zeman* has for younger viewers (75), Pehe's book locates the simultaneity between the concerns surrounding the series' revival with the popular reception of *Cozy Dens* and the debates about the persistence of singer Karel Gott (72–73). Such analysis exemplifies a notable strength of *Velvet Retro*: its ability to balance between its brevity and its breadth of references through which Pehe strikes argumentative throughlines. Pehe manages to rationalize, for instance, the coexistence of jokes in *Cozy Dens* that target the shoddiness of socialist-era products alongside the offscreen consumer appeal of local tradition that ironically imbues the postsocialist production of socialist-era items such as Kofola cola and Botas 66 trainers (104–105).

Further, the Czech localization of "pick-and-choose" aesthetic possibilities and ironic inclinations render *Velvet Retro* valuable for deepening discussions on postmodernism. Within a small Central European nation exists a span of shifting postsocialist narratives understood by a public whose pre-1989 order had been teleologically hinged on promises of building socialism. What ensued from that modern grand narrative was not an earthly utopia it promised, but rather a postsocialist reality imbued – like with any "post-" paradigm — with residual effects of the socialist past (158). By constructing her arguments based on pieces of Czech postsocialist evidence, Pehe posits challenges to several of the flattening and fatalistic ideas found in Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (which, like *Velvet Retro,* incorporates into its analysis a wide variety of cultural products from architecture to graphic art, though mainly of American and Western origins).[4] Pehe argues that unlike Jameson's model of the "nostalgia film" that is predicated on a politically superficial image of the history it represents, the retro film, while employing aesthetics of the past, is rather politically engaged, inviting viewers to reckon with methods to reflect on the past order while reinforcing that the present one is superior (53, 158).

Proposing that retro is not a Czech-specific quality, Pehe brings up the popularity of the American series *Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner, 2007–2015) (115, 158). While viewers may revel in the visuals of the 1960s and 1970s of the Manhattan advertising agency world, the archaic social mores of the show may reinforce faith in the progress that society has since undergone (115). Indeed, the valences of masculinity and American myths that inform the historical story-world constructed in *Mad Men* differ from those of a John Wayne Western. As such, Pehe's intrinsically formed arguments about popular culture in *Velvet Retro* could transcend beyond Czech and socialist bounds and help shed light on other seemingly simplified portrayals of the past, exposing dimensions of the temporal complexities that their visual appeals may belie.

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4) See Fredric Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (New Haven: Duke University Press, 1992), 1–54.

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