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Charting Post-Underground Nostalgia

Anachronistic Practices of the Post-Velvet Revolution Rock Scene

1993 is a year of two significant break-ups. While the federal Czechoslovakia was falling apart,[1] the legendary alternative rock band Psí vojáci (Dog Soldiers), founded during the harsh period of normalization in 1979, was also bidding its public farewell. The reason for this parting was a decision by one of three founding members to withdraw from the band, which, in turn, resulted in the decision of other musicians to disband as well. On the night of October 23, the Great Hall of Lucerna Palace in Prague witnessed a melancholic scene: on the stage, a silver revolver, pointed toward the audience, was placed on a black Weinbach grand piano right next to the ashtray and pile of wrinkled lyric sheets that bandleader, pianist, lyricist, singer, and composer, Filip Topol, used to stick onto his instrument. At the end of the concert, amid the gloomy faces of the players and the frontman's hardly concealed weeping, his sheets of lyrics were, as a farewell gesture, thrown into the audience.

Although many fans and critics saw the 'last goodbye' as a mere promotional trick,[2] since only a few months later, a new bass guitarist was found and the band started playing gigs again, a symbolic break with the past had, indeed, taken place. On the one hand, it initiated the most creative period in the band's career, full of remarkable studio experiments, sophisticated compositions, and rather abstract, fragmentary lyrics. On the other hand, the clubs and concert halls were being crowded with younger and younger fans along with the underground contemporaries who demanded only the 'big beat' smash hits from the 1980s along with the wild, self-destructive spectacle of the bandleader, including blood from his fingers and wrists on the keyboard. In other words, whereas the music and poet-

1) For a more detailed account of the event as well as the rhetoric underlying the split see Ladislav Holý, *The Little Czech and The Great Czech Nation: National Identity and the Post-communist Social Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. pp. 198–199.

2) A contrary point of view was advocated only by Pavel Klusák, 'Psí labutí píseň', *Respekt*, vol. 4, no. 48 (1993), p. 15. As for the bandleader himself: in an interview from 1995, he denied that the split was a promotional gimmick, admitting to 'crying virtually during the whole last show'. Ondřej Bezr et al., 'Filip Topol (rozhovor s Filipem Topolem)', *Rock & Pop*, vol. 6, no. 26 (1995), p. XI.

ics of the band had radically transformed during the 1990s, the conservative *post-underground* audience wanted to hear and see something entirely different, they longed much less for novelty than for the continuity and survival of the cultural and aesthetic patterns of the normalization period.

This essay examines the socio-cultural mechanisms underlying the anachronistic stance that substantially shaped the musical landscape in the post-communist era. Using the case study of the band Psí vojáci, it explains the roles of the audience, the music industry, and journalists, all of whose activity resulted in a stereotypical canonization of the multifaced alternative rock band under the label of 'underground legend'. In analyzing the band and its music not so much from an aesthetic point of view but rather in terms of a cultural practice whose production is conditioned to the same degree by audience demand as by the imperatives of the music industry and media discourse, I take my cue primarily from the sociological research of pop and rock music that focuses on various practices within the web of politics, policies, and institutions and on the network of communication between the stage and the audience, as well as from ethnographic studies of the music industry. The present case study should enrich an understanding of the post-socialist cultural transition and its meaning-making practices as a complex dialogic process between many interlocutors, including the newborn music industry in search of commercial potentialities, both old and new fans, the free press, and the band itself.

As part of this approach, several interviews were conducted with participants from the band and persons involved in its production background, in particular with the executives from the band's labels, which stand here for 'cultural intermediaries' that play a pivotal role in articulating production with consumption.[3] Drawing on the groundbreaking research of Georgina Born on how music materializes identities, rather than analyzing the band's highly original sound and lyrics, I attempt to explore its music as a cultural object, 'an aggregation of sonic, social, corporeal, discursive, visual, technological and temporal mediations — a musical assemblage, where this is understood as a characteristic constellation of such heterogeneous mediations'.[4] For my attempt to shed new light on the cultural scene of the 1990s, especially its music practices, I employ the convenient concept of the 'circuit of culture' provided by Paul Du Gay. Drawing on the mutual dependence of the production of culture and the culture of production, i.e. 'the ways in which practices of production are inscribed with particular cultural meanings', Du Gay argues that these 'meanings are produced at several different sites and circulated through several different processes and practices'.[5] Among them, he distinguishes five major cultural processes — representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation — that continually overlap and intertwine, upon which the circuit of culture is based and whereby it is driv-

3) See Sean Nixon, 'Circulating Culture', in Paul Du Gay (ed.), *Production of Culture / Cultures of Production* (London: Sage / The Open University, 1997), p. 181.

4) Georgina Born, 'Music and the Materialization of Identities', *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 16, no. 4 (2011), p. 377.

5) Paul Du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay, Keith Negus (eds.), *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (London: Sage/Open University, 1997), p. 4; Paul Du Gay (ed.), *Production of Culture / Cultures of Production*, p. 10. For an elaborated critique of Du Gay's approach see Ben Fine, *The World of Consumption: The Material and Cultural Revisited* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 104–106.

en. However, along with observing 'how it is represented, what social identities are associated with it, how it is produced and consumed, and what mechanisms regulate its distribution and use'[6] — in other words, how the properly functioning circuit of culture proceeds — an even more important goal of this essay is to point out that such a circuit is regularly disturbed by various paradoxes, tensions, and contradictions and, as a result, it tends to be *short-circuited*.[7]

The reason for these cultural short-circuits lies in the conflicting dialogue and concomitant tensions between, on the one hand, the actual musical production of the contemporary band, and, on the other, the reconfigured cultural sectors coming to terms with both symbolically representing the past in new ways and exploiting it commercially. Structuring my argument around the four main nodes — the band, the music industry, the press, and the fans — I will explain how each of these tensions were negotiated. An examination of such tensions and splits, widely shared by the cultural circuits of other post-communist countries, should offer productive insight into the East-Central European cultural landscape and provide a few concepts for its more subtle analysis.

Exploring the Czech music industry after 1989, Micheal C. Elavsky aptly observes that rather than a dynamic transformation, its contemporary field offers an anachronistic mirror image of the era before the fall of the Iron Curtain.

> While post-communism's promise to provide greater opportunities for musical expression and the wider dissemination of Czech musical articulations have been ostensibly delivered, the ideological underpinnings and infrastructure within the processes of globalisation in fact constrain Czech music culture in ways that paradoxically mirror those of their communist forebears. Sometimes the more things change, the more they stay the same.[8]

Given these conditions, a number of questions arise with respect to the particular production, reception, and media image of the band Psí vojáci. Did the *post-underground* audience — which can be defined as a diverse and multigenerational group of post-Velvet Revolution fans, listeners, and concert-goers whose reception practices were underpinned by nostalgia for the underground past and by the aim to preserve the myth of authenticity and anti-commercialism in spite of actual production practices — have its share in the above-outlined fossilization of the band's image? And if so, in what ways did it push the contemporary band toward the continuous repetition of its old production? How do the post-communist ideological and infrastructural forces relate to the so-called 'alternative scene,' which defined itself as immune to any form of commercialism and as entirely inde-

6) Du Gay et al. (eds.), *Doing Cultural Studies*, p. 3.

7) For an excellent summation of breakdown, failure, and error in social theory see Stephen Graham, Nigel Thrift, 'Out of Order: Understanding Repair and Maintenance', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2007), pp. 1–25. Failure and disorder are also viewed as inherent features of the music industry prevailing over its own criteria of success by Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (London and New York, Routledge, 1999).

8) Michael C. Elavsky: 'Czech Republic', in Lee Marshall (ed.), *The International Recording Industries* (Oxfordshire: Routledge 2012), p. 95.

pendent of market forces?[9] What role did the media of the 1990s play in creating the specific anachronistic and conservative taste? And — if, according to Antoine Hennion, taste is an accomplishment, an event produced by mutually transformative relations between music lovers and music sounds — [10] what kind of performance resulted in the fact that the more the band *changed*, the more it *stayed* the same?

I. The Self-Emptying Brand of the Underground and Its Afterlife

Hardly any critic between 1990 and today has failed to mention the compelling term 'underground', when writing about Psí vojáci, yet a convincing justification of this label has been conspicuously absent. As early as one year after the Velvet Revolution, the frontman himself protested against the label: 'It makes me angry to hear all the time that we play underground, because such a thing cannot be played. Underground is a spiritual attitude; it is a highly tolerant approach towards life and, at the same time, opposition to everything.'[11] However, from the point of view of the political dispositif of the underground, his own case remains exemplary. In April 1978, a year before founding his band together with elementary school schoolmates under the great influence of The Doors, the 12-year-old Filip Topol was invited by none other than famous playwright and dissident Václav Havel (a close friend of Filip's father, the dramatist Josef Topol) to perform at his country house Hrádeček as opening band for the legendary and illegal music group The Plastic People of the Universe (PPU), who had just recently been released from prison. Thus, from the very beginning, Psí vojáci were classified among the enemies of the communist regime. They had already aroused suspicions for being named after 'Dog Soldiers', the Cheyenne military society from Thomas Berger's novel *Little Big Man*. The group member's desire to pursue a professional rock career was promptly denied as the bandleader went through his first police interrogation shortly after their first official concert in November 1979, whereupon the band was officially banned, and able to perform and record only rarely and secretly in friends' cellars, barns, and gardens.[12] The complete media silence was interrupted only once by two articles that were both published in 1986 in the samizdat journal *Vokno*, whose authors were Topol himself (under the pseudonym 'Josef Novák') and the

9) For a comprehensive definition of alternative culture as a 'more or less intentional deviation from the dominant cultural streams that […] were enforced through power and supported by the totalitarian regime of state socialism while seeping into the mass and consumerist culture,' see Josef Alan (ed.), 'Alternativní kultura jako sociologické téma', in *Alternativní kultura. Příběh české společnosti 1945–1989* (Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2001), p. 7. A narrower notion is provided by Miroslav Vaněk, who contends that the alternative music scene embraced the rock groups which were gathered around the Jazz Section (Jazzová sekce) and offered an alternative not only to the pop and official 'bigbeat music' but also to its opposite: the underground. See Miroslav Vaněk, *Byl to jenom rock'n'roll?: hudební alternativa v komunistickém Československu 1956–1989* (Praha: Academia, 2010), pp. 58–62, 256–272.

10) Antoine Hennion, 'Music and Mediation: Toward a New Sociology of Music', in M. Clayton et al. (eds.), *The Cultural Study of Music* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 90.

11) Ivan Hartman, 'Jak Topol potkal věčnost (rozhovor s Filipem Topolem)', *Rock & Pop*, vol. 1, no. 5 (1990), p. 6.

12) The band's development until 1999 is comprehensively described by Jaroslav Riedel (ed.), *Národ Psích vojáků* (Praha: Maťa, 1999), pp. 14–19.

poet, artistic director of PPU, and *spiritus movens* of the Czech underground, Ivan Martin Jirous. Interestingly enough, Topol's article mentions the 'underground' only once — when confirming that the band never declared any affiliation with it.[13)]

Yet, what did it mean to be a part of the 'underground', and is the even term relevant for a particular mode of music production? It is a well-known fact that rather than a declared, systemic oppositional movement against the regime, the Czechoslovak underground represented an intellectual and deliberately non-political stance that sought the creation of a parallel world based on independent thinking, personal freedom, and free artistic expression.[14)] As stated by Jirous in his highly influential manifesto 'Report on the Third Czech Music Revival' (Zpráva o třetím českém hudebním obrození, 1975), 'the goal of our underground is to create a second culture, a culture completely independent from all official communication and the conventional hierarchy of value judgements put out by the establishment.'[15)] Importantly, a bit earlier in his essay, he clarifies that such a spiritual position does not entail a particular artistic movement or music style 'in spite of the fact that, in music, it manifests itself primarily in the form of rock.'[16)] Leaving aside the question of whether the label 'underground' is relevant for any artistic production after the fall of the Communist regime, it follows that rather than any set of stylistic, genre, or distinctive poetic features the term designates a specific musically imagined community, based on affective and social alliances.[17)]

Despite a strong intellectual alliance with the underground milieu — particularly Filip Topol's friendship with Jirous and Vratislav Brabenec, the saxophonist of the PPU — and despite the prohibition by the regime, the band quickly became a sort of outsider formation, mainly due to its unique mode of expression that had virtually nothing in common with the contemporary Czech underground music, as represented by such bands as the PPU, DG 307, Umělá hmota, and Aktual.[18)] While the latter largely relied on a playful musical 'dilettantism', untrained improvisation and avant-garde experimentation mixing the primitive melodies and the sounds of various instruments from the realm of rock and other genres (mainly violin, saxophone, and synthesizer) combined with the noise made by

13) 'Regardless the view of the band, I. M. Jirous and the StB [state secret police] had the same opinion: It is underground.' Josef Novák, 'Psí vojáci', *Vokno*, vol. 5, no. 10 (1986), p. 39.

14) For the intersections between the Czech musical underground and the political opposition between 1968 and 1989 see Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 115–47; Lars Berggren, 'Mothers, Plastic people and Václav Havel', in Björn Horgby, Fredrik Nilsson (eds.), *Rockin' the Borders: Rock Music and Social, Cultural and Political Change* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), pp. 49–66; Martin Machovec, 'Czech Underground Musicians in Search of Art Innovation', *East Central Europe*, vol. 38, no. 2–3 (2011), pp. 221–37.

15) Ivan Martin Jirous, 'Report on the Third Czech Music Revival', in Laura J. Hoptman, Tomáš Pospiszyl (eds.), *Primary Documents: Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, trans. Erik Dluhosch (New York: MOMA, 2002), p. 64.

16) Jirous, 'Report on the Third Czech Music Revival', p. 64.

17) See Born, 'Music and the Materialization of Identities', p. 381, according to whom the musically imagined communities 'may reproduce or memorialize extant identity formations, generate purely fantasized identifications, or prefigure emergent identity formations by forging novel social alliances.'

18) A similar view was held by Jirous already in 1986. See Ivan Martin Jirous, 'Psí vojáci', in *Magorův zápisník* (Praha: Torst, 1997), p. 234.

all kinds of objects (e.g. a saw, a hammer, sheet metal), and often referencing The Velvet Underground as their primary music influence; the expression of Psí vojáci was dominated by the piano as lead instrument which, along with the punk-like rhythms of the drums and bass, created a peculiar combination of rock techniques, free jazz, blues harmony, modern chanson, and classical music, employing sudden switches between minor melodic chords and cadential dissonances, and Topol's fierce declamation and screaming of elaborate poems (at that time written by his elder brother, poet, and since 1992 important novelist, Jáchym Topol). As primary sources of influence, Topol typically indicated The Doors, John Cale, and the classical musicians of the second half of the 18th century.

The characteristic sound and lyrics were, however, by no means the only ways in which Psí vojáci differed from other underground bands. In 1986, tired of repeated police interrogations and the strenuous conditions of the illegal concerts, the musicians decided to acquire official status, leaving the illegal 'underground' to enter the semi-official 'ground floor'.[19] In order for the banned group to be allowed to perform publicly again, it had to make an important compromise and rename, which was, at least in theory, seen as a betrayal of trust by the underground community.[20] Without fully adopting the sharp criticism of Jolanta Pekacz, who pointed out the usually overlooked pragmatism and opportunism of the East-Central European rock scene towards the Communist ideology and regime, one might suggest that in this context, her distinction of two levels of ideology — formal (official) and operative — is at stake.[21] For that matter, the compromise allowing the band to take part in the semi-official music scene was slightly subverted as the band had picked out quite a transparent acronym P.V.O. ('Psí vojáci osobně' /Dog Soldiers Personally/) under which it performed until the Velvet Revolution.

Consequently, after 1986, in the eyes of some of the underground community the band members were seen as suspicious pop stars. As Filip Topol recalls in an interview from 1992, 'plenty of people from the underground scene at Klamovka reproached me: 'You're a Michal David of the underground, students come to your shows.' But I'm glad they come.'[22] Not only did they no longer fit the label of 'underground', Psí vojáci were likewise not fully accepted by members of the alternative scene, situated on the borders of legality and illegality.[23] One of the main protagonists of the alternative scene, saxophone player

19) Jan Cholínský, 'Stojíme u zdi. K českému hudebnímu undergroundu 80. let', *Paměť a dějiny*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2015), p. 81.

20) Cf. Jirous, 'Report on the Third Czech Music Revival', 63. 'As soon as the devil […] (speaking as the spokesperson for the establishment) asks you to change your name and promises in turn that you will be allowed to play again, as you played before, it is time to say no again — no, we will not play.'

21) Jolanta Pekacz, 'Did Rock Smash the Wall? The Role of Rock in Political Transition', *Popular Music*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1994), p. 44.

22) Milan Ležák, 'Připadám si jako ementál (rozhovor s Filipem Topolem)', *Melodie*, vol. 10, no. 30 (1992), p. 12. The Klamovka pub in Prague, situated in the eponymous park in Košíře, was a legendary meeting point of the Czech underground community during the 1970s and 1980s. Michal David is a pop singer, songwriter, and producer — an emblematic person of the pro-regime 'normalization music' of the 1980s.

23) For a more detailed account of the so called 'grey zone', the unofficial rock scene that distinguished itself not only from the regime but also from the underground, see Josef Vlček, 'Hudební alternativní scény sedmdesátých až osmdesátých let', in Josef Alan (ed.), *Alternativní kultura*, pp. 201–263. Basically, the crucial difference between the underground and the alternative scene rested in the degree of their criticism towards normalization; whereas the former strived to be apolitical 'while being pushed into politics and dissent only

and singer of the band Extempore, Mikoláš Chadima, who famously criticized the underground community for indulging in a sort of 'messianism' and clinging to a 'ghetto mentality', occasionally referred to Psí vojáci as intolerant, arrogant, and too-oft drunken underground 'superstars', obsessed with their growing fame.[24)]

Entering the club scene in 1986 had a crucial impact on the band, not only in terms of the growing numbers of mainly Prague concerts performed back to back with other alternative, folk, and punk rock musicians, but also in terms of their music itself and its engaging form, thanks to which the band enjoys extraordinary popularity across various generations and social groups. The formal influence of the numerous concerts, given in a relaxed atmosphere for diverse audiences in the rock clubs, is easily recognizable on many archive recordings from that period and Topol himself has confirmed the impact of these concerts, which he considered inspiring in terms of pushing the band towards formal simplification.[25)] It is, indeed, the second half of the 1980s that gave rise to the band's famous 'big beat' repertoire which, as discussed below, has not only remained part of their canon, but also comprises the songs that most appealed to the 1990s audiences, journalists and their recording label despite the band's significant stylistic, lyrical, and musical transformations after its symbolical break-up in 1993. It was during this period that the iconic hits and cult songs such as 'Marilyn Monroe' (1987), 'Žiletky' (Razor Blades, 1988), and 'Russian Mystic pop. op. IV' (1988) were born, while others, which had been written earlier, e.g. 'Sbohem a řetěz' (Goodbye and Chain, 1985), 'Černý sedlo' (The Black Saddle, 1980) a 'Hospoda' (Pub, 1980), became equally popular. These songs all have in common the combination of a catchy melody, simple refrain, and varied punk rhythms, whose main goal is to underpin the remarkable spoken or chanted rhyming lyrics, evoking an existential and often grotesque micro-narrative.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the repertoire became even more famous as the band became fully professional, playing regular gigs several times per month in the former Czechoslovakia and occasionally abroad, and also because it released three studio albums between 1989 and 1991, which included all of those famous songs.[26)] Yet it is also the first third of this decade which saw a growing weariness of the concert repertoire along with a certain creative crisis among the band members. They were tired of playing the same

by the circumstances', the latter responded directly to the official products of normalization culture. Vlček, 'Hudební alternativní scény sedmdesátých až osmdesátých let', p. 232; Vaněk, *Byl to jenom rock'n'roll?*, p. 59.

24) Mikoláš Chadima, *Alternativa. Svědectví o českém rock & rollu sedmdesátých let. Od rekvalifikací k "nové vlně se starým obsahem"* (Praha: Host, 1992), p. 344. For his critique of the 'ghetto mentality' of the underground see Chadima, 'Alternativa. My nejsme underground!', in *Alternativní kultura*, pp. 370–401.

25) See Jiří Fiedor, 'Považuji se za hudebního skladatele (rozhovor s Filipem Topolem)', *Lidová demokracie*, vol. 49, no. 295 (1993), p. 10; Petr Korál: 'Filip Topol (rozhovor s Filipem Topolem)', *Rock & Pop*, vol. 10, no. 11 (1999), p. 55.

26) The very first official studio record was released already at the end of 1989 by the label Panton as part of its 'Rock Debut' edition, whereby the band — at that time still under the code name of P. V. O. — released an LP that included four of its hitherto most popular songs ('Psycho Killer', 'Marilyn Monroe', 'Žiletky', 'Sbohem a řetěz'). Before signing a contract with its henceforth major label, Indies Records, in 1994, the band released the following albums: *Nalej čistého vína, pokrytče* (Come Clean, You Hypocrite; Globus International, LP, MC, CD, 1991); *Leitmotiv* (Globus International, LP, MC, CD, 1991); *Live I, Live II* (Gang Records, 1993, LP, MC, CD).

songs over and over again (which was eventually one of the main reasons for the bass guitarist Jan Hazuka's withdrawal), and sought a way out of this crisis by engaging in a new, less song-like musical expression as is apparent on the concert double records *Live I* / *Live II* (1993).

The first anachronistic paradox thus demands attention. After recording the new album *Sestra* (Sister) in 1994, a major turning point occurred, which is easily heard on every single album released during the short yet intense period until 1997.[27] With this album, the band starts to experiment with larger, richer and more sophisticated compositions, studio sounds, and even electric keyboards, which Topol — a classically trained pianist with a degree from the public conservatory where he had studied organ performance and baroque music before 1989 — had quite rejected until that point. The lyrics, too, underwent a fundamental transformation, abandoning rhyme and simple refrains to become more fragmentary, abstract, and non-narrative in form, unfolding intangible atmospheres, lyrical incantations, and recurring affective figures. At the same time, though, what the band was regularly performing at its more than seventy concerts per year until its final break-up in 2013, was above all the iconic hits that had been created and widely acclaimed even before 1989. Those were the desired songs, loudly and insistently demanded at all concerts by the audience, which shouted out their titles over the novel, innovative, and as yet unknown pieces of the 'renewed' 1990s Psí vojáci. As a result, whatever new directions and experimental paths the band strove to explore, it will be forever branded as an 'underground legend' and its pre-1989 repertoire will be the dominant template through which it will be heard. Whereas the band's mid-1990s compositions and recordings bade farewell to its underground past and 'sound', its concert practices adhered to this past, due to the lack of acceptance for their new work by audiences and in media discourse.

II. Negotiations with Music Industry: Indies Records' 'Anti-Commercial' Policy

The incongruity, which caused the above described anachronistic paradox, is most evident in, of all places, the production policies of the two independent labels that took the band on during the 1990s, namely the major player in the field of alternative and world music, Indies Records, which became the band's home label after 1994, and the much smaller Black Point, which released both archival and contemporary alternative music. In the mere seven years after its professionalization in 1990, the band impressively recorded nine albums, the most progressive of which were released by Indies Records: *Sestra* (Sister, 1994), *Brutální lyrika* (Brutal Lyricism, 1995), *Sakramiláčku* (Damnhoney, 1995), and *Hořící holubi* (Flaming Pigeons, 1997). Yet the new musical output at Indies Records, which displayed a radical transformation of the musical techniques and methods, the sound, and the lyrics of the band, has a substantial antithesis in the parallel releasing of

27) As the Indies Records founders recall, releasing the album *Sestra* in 1994 initiated the label's professional path as it was the first time that they 'had to act as real producers, to take care of promotion and distribution. Unfamiliar with such procedures, we must have learned that on the fly.' Online: <http://www.mestohudby.cz/publicistika/rozhovory/meznikem-byla-sestra-psich-vojaku-25-let-vydavatelstvi-indies> [accessed 14 September 2016].

pre-1989 archival recordings, remastered and distributed by Black Point, which not only documented the band's musical evolution but also captured the unique atmosphere of those illegal and semi-legal concerts.[28] One of the reasons for this incongruity was, beyond any doubt, the Black Point director's uncompromising attitude towards the band's past output: 'They reached their peak in 1986. Everything that came afterward was sheer pop with hysterical and screaming fangirls everywhere!'[29] Given the negligible sales profit, it is evident in this context that the conflict of interests was rooted primarily in a conflict of tastes; both Black Point and Indies Records helped to increase the band's popularity, even though the two widely different renderings of the band's cultural meanings and 'sound' have very little in common.

However, this is not the only antithesis to the band's contemporary output in the 1990s. The second one was provided by Indies Records itself, which pushed the band to re-record their most famous and hence, it goes without saying, most overplayed songs. The album of these remade songs was released under the title *Národ Psích vojáků* (Dog Soldiers Nation) in 1996 — at the same time as the very same label was releasing the band's new records, which displayed a completely different artistic direction. To fully understand this anachronistic step, which points to a peculiar paradox both within the label's production strategy and, no less importantly, in the band's 'underground' status, it is necessary to present a brief survey of the record label's position and policy.

During the 1990s, Indies Records (founded in Brno in 1990) established itself as the most progressive domestic independent label for Czech alternative and world music, representing a unique counterbalance to the transnational major labels of the so-called Big Five (EMI, Sony Music, BMG, PolyGram, and Warner Music) whose subsidiaries operated extensively on the local market but showed almost no interest in producing Czech alternative music.[30] Along with producing rather unknown rock and hardcore musicians as well as highlights from the alternative folk scene — such as the singer and violinist Iva Bittová or the band Jablkoň — the Indies Records roster was comprised of bands that used to perform in the same club scene as Psí vojáci, most notably Už jsme doma (There you go) and Zuby nehty (Tooth and Nail). The label began with a rather DIY music rental shop, operated by two friends, who owned circa 150 CDs comprised partly of their own concert recordings, and partly of informal acquisitions from an independent store in Vienna.[31] The music shop quickly gained recognition for its unprecedented selection of all different genres of recordings which were, at that time, in short supply. Eventually, they managed to

28) The chronological order in which they were released by Black Point is as follows: *Psí vojáci — Vol. 1* and *Psí vojáci — Vol. 2* (MC, 1990); *Psí vojáci 1979/80 Live* (MC, 1991); *Baroko v Čechách* (Baroque in Bohemia; MC, 1993); *Nechoď sama do tmy* (Don't Go Out Alone after Dark: Works from 1983–1986; CD, MC); *Mučivé vzpomínky* (Torturing Memories: Works from 1987–1989; CD, MC, 1997). The band's complete early works were released later on a remastered triple CD in 2000, entitled *Psi a vojáci. Baroko v Čechách. Studio 1983––1985* (Dogs and Soldiers, Baroque in Bohemia, Studio 1983–1985).

29) Interview with Oldřich Šíma, 6. 11. 2015, in Prague.

30) Michael C. Elavsky, 'Musically Mapped: Czech Popular Music as a Second "World Sound"', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2011), pp. 3–24. For a more detailed account of the major labels operating on Czech market and their subsequent joint ventures see Elavsky, 'Czech Republic', esp. pp. 100–103.

31) See online: <http://www.mestohudby.cz/publicistika/rozhovory/meznikem-byla-sestra-psich-vojaku-25-let-vydavatelstvi-indies> [accessed 14 September 2016].

establish a prominent record company which not only promoted and supported the work of a high number of alternative musicians, but also substantially cultivated the domestic media scene, which was otherwise encumbered by low-grade television music programs and radio broadcasts. Far from being mere pay-and-go-stores, the small Indies records shops — located in Brno, Olomouc, and Ostrava — functioned primarily as enriching cultural and social platforms, whose sales clerks were mostly dedicated connoisseurs, ready to instruct, recommend, and share their insights on all kinds of popular and rock music, and places where one could find valuable and otherwise rare music journals (such as *Uni*, a cultural magazine published by Unijazz).

But, as Elavsky points out in his brilliant exploration of the Czech music industry after 1989, Indies Records represented a certain paradox. On the one hand, musicians belonging to the liberal label were provided creative freedom, important media exposure, and a broad distribution on Czech market. On the other hand, however, its production policy, which was oriented exclusively towards 'non-commercial' and 'independent' creation outside the mainstream, embodied a constraining ideology, which — summarized by their motto 'We only release music that we like' — curtailed broader promotion into the domestic commercial media sphere and thus precluded their being seen and heard globally on the world music marketplace. 'By working only with musicians which they deem to be outside the Czech mainstream,' concludes Elavsky, 'Indies Records effectually positions itself and its domestic repertoire in the realm of 'higher culture', seeking primarily to appeal to an audience that considers itself to be intellectually or artistically discerning.' Such an anti-mainstream policy then, begs the question 'as to how effectively it actually 'represents' Czech culture.'[32)]

The anticommercial stance of Indies Records certainly echoes the sceptical attitude of Psí vojáci, and not only on account of the fact that a share from the sale of CDs and MCs (musicassettes), split equally among the musicians, hardly exceeded 15.000 Czech crowns (circa 600 euros) per person per year, but mainly insofar as the admitting of any financial profit was deemed low and antithetical to the post-underground alternative culture, which proclaimed an anti-commercial ethos.[33)] The bandleader himself would all but confirm such an attitude on many occasions: 'Nobody buys Psí vojáci or Topol anyway, it's just a marginal issue. We're neither Lucie nor Alice. But whoever fancies us, they buy us. I don't care about sales. After all, music is a matter of the soul.'[34)] Nonetheless, this very soul was easily persuaded by the Indies Records executives in 1996 to record and release studio remakes of his band's 14 'greatest hits', their most overplayed songs from the second half of

32) Elavsky, 'Musically Mapped', p. 17.

33) A striking analogy might be observed in another conflict from the same decade, between the anti-commercial ethos of grunge and the success it achieved. Considering the success of grunge in relation to theories of authenticity and commercialization, Catherine Strong observes its paradoxical position: 'As grunge's authenticity was constructed in the press as being associated with rejection of success as defined within the wider field of power, as soon as grunge started to obtain such success it began to undermine the basis on which that success was (partly) built.' Catherine Strong, *Grunge: Music and Memory* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 56.

34) Ondřej Bezr et al., 'Filip Topol', p. XI. Besides being common Czech girls names, Alice (mainly 1990–1997) and Lucie (founded in 1985) are two allied Czech rock bands, highly popular especially after their common tour in 1991.

the 1980s. Interestingly enough, this occurs right at the moment when the same label releases in the course of three years four new, rather experimental albums (*Sestra*, *Brutální lyrika*, *Sakramiláčku*, *Hořící holubi*) whose sound, lyrics, diverse expression, and compositions mark a critical break from the former cult songs and smash hits.[35)]

A nostalgic gesture, a pure marketing gimmick, or both? First and foremost, the 'greatest hits' album represents a return to the old, well-known repertoire that the band was compelled to perform on demand and almost without exception at all concerts. The only exception was the last piece on the album, which had been hitherto known only to a small circle of the most devoted fans, namely an archival concert recording of the song 'Psí vojáci' from 1979 featuring the youthful voice of then 14-year-old Filip Topol, which combined an imaginary battle hymn of the eponymous Indian tribe with a clear political allusion. The choice to make this the closing piece of the whole album otherwise comprised exclusively of popular and played-out songs, may be perceived as a symbolic wink to the fans — suggesting a spiritual continuity with the old days of the underground and resistance. By the same token, this peculiar nostalgic, or rather anachronistic gesture can be understood as framing the multifarious present, full of creative quests, with the unequivocally mediated past. Despite its somehow monotonous sound; somewhat sloppy, even indifferent performances; and stiff expression, the album was hastily welcomed with a generally eulogizing tone by music journalists. These critics focused less on a close listening of the music than on celebrating the fact that the smash hits were at last collected on a single record;[36)] but they were all the more criticized by the frontman himself. As he noted at the very end of the 1990s in an interview, 'I am not a huge fan of returns. I think you can tell it from the album […] what Indies wanted from us all the time. While recording, I wasn't able to pay the songs as much attention as they would deserve which, now, I feel sorry about.'[37)] Later on, bass guitarist Luděk Horký unambiguously confirmed this attitude, claiming very low motivation during recording and pointing out the interesting fact that since the musicians were not able to remake all the songs in sufficient quality, the song 'Nebe je zatažený' (The Sky has Clouded Over, 1991) was simply reproduced from the album *Leitmotiv* released five years previously.[38)] In spite of these shortcomings, the fact remains that the sale of the album was twice as high as any of their other releases:[39)] between 1996 and 2000, circa 5000 CDs and 4000 MCs were sold; in the period after 2000, circa 2300 CDs were sold.[40)] As such, it quickly became the leading Indies Records bestseller of

35) For a detailed analysis of these records see Tomáš Jirsa, '"Pocity jak žiletky": Psí vojáci na pozadí anachronní touhy 90. let', in Petr A. Bílek, Josef Šebek (eds.), *Česká populární kultura: Transfery, transponování a další tranzitní procesy* (Praha: FF UK, 2017), pp. 180–229.

36) This is obvious from the very titles of the reviews, see esp. Ivan Hartman, 'Písně jako žiletky [Songs like razor blades]', *Lidové noviny*, vol. 9, no. 234 (1996): *Národní*, no. 40, p. III; Vladimír Vlasák, 'Vzpomínky Psích vojáků nekorodují [The memories of Psí vojáci do not get rusty]', *Mladá fronta Dnes*, vol. 7, no. 230 (1996), p. 19.

37) Petr Korál, 'Filip Topol (rozhovor s Filipem Topolem)', p. 55.

38) Interview with Luděk Horký, bass guitarist, 2. 11. 2016, in Prague.

39) With the lone exception of the double album *Bílé inferno* (White Inferno, 1997) by Iva Bittová and Vladimír Václavek the sale of which, however, reached the same numbers as *Národ Psích vojáků* only at the very beginning of the 21st century. (Interview with Miloš Gruber, director of Indies MG, 25. 11. 2015, in Brno).

40) Interview with Miloš Gruber, director of Indies MG, 25. 11. 2015, in Brno. However negligible these numbers might appear from a global music industry perspective, one must not forget the impact of the proliferating

the entire 1990s, a decade that one of their executives recently called 'the golden era of the music industry'.[41)]

As a result, the release says much less about the characteristic expression of the band, let alone its evolution, than about the remarkably anachronistic atmosphere and nostalgic demands of the post-socialist era. It is perhaps no surprise that even though marketing the underground past in the form of new-old 'greatest hits' is a well-considered strategy, driven by commercial interests from the very beginning,[42)] this release remained a unique exception within the Indies Records catalogue throughout the 1990s — only Psí vojáci had the special 'touch', the potential to satisfy the audience's desire for the bright memories of the darker times. This peculiar label paradox thus lies ultimately in the split between a somewhat failed self-revival, symbolizing a slightly mummified underground period, and the contemporary radical transformation of both the music and lyrics of the band. In terms of the market, within which any artistic innovation is subject to the demand of the audience, this is quite a logical step. It shows how readily the anti-mainstream 'alternative' culture, rooted in the ideal of independence from any market or political ideologies, becomes a world of 'commercial' pop. Such symbolic exploitation on the part of the music industry, therefore, does not consist in profiteering whatsoever, but purely demonstrates that the label — as a powerful cultural intermediary — had effectively codified a certain conservative post-underground taste.

III. Under the Weight of a Life Story: The Journalist Echo

A closer look into the discourse of music journalism clearly reveals the large extent to which it contributed to the persistent anachronistic patterns. In what follows, I will consider another circuit involving both representation and consumption: the reconfigured journalistic apparatus. My examination suggests that the impetus to make an anachronistic musical 'memorial' of Psí vojáci lies equally with the critical acclaim of journalists, which merely strengthened the 1990s conservative post-underground attitude. It is no exaggeration to claim that the vast majority of music critics and cultural commentators were in unanimous agreement regarding the band's uniqueness, originality, and distinctiveness in both its recorded output and its performances. The poetic value and high quality of Topol's lyrics, which towered above the usual level of other Czech rock and alternative bands, were praised together with the band's genuine musical expression, their so-called 'sound' which, in fact, formed their main commodity and guarantee in terms of the music market. The band's sound, described by Topol as 'dog music', the singularity of which is

phenomenon of music piracy (tape copying and CD burning), which was a dominant source of public and home consumption during the 1990s. For further information see Pavla Kozáková, Mark Andress, 'Czech Music Industry Unites Against CD-Burning Outlets', *Billboard,* 19 October 2002, p. 57; and Elavsky, 'Czech Republic', p. 104, according to whom 'CD burning became such a burgeoning trend such that, by 2002, it was estimated that every second CD in the Czech Republic was a copy'.

41) See online: <http://www.mestohudby.cz/publicistika/rozhovory/meznikem-byla-sestra-psich-vojaku-25-let-vydavatelstvi-indies> [accessed 14 September 2016].

42) Email interview with Miloš Gruber, director of Indies MG, 20. 11. 2016.

explained by most critics as a peculiar combination of rock (or rather 'big beat'), chanson, and classical music; there are also tendencies to compare the band with the most influential rock musicians and ensembles of the second half of the 20th century. Last but not least, the critics emphasized the thrilling performances of the bandleader 'taming his piano'.

The technique of 'taming the piano', as Topol liked to call his way of playing, is far from being a quaint metaphor. Not only did he regularly hammer the piano with fists, elbows, feet, and knees, while enjoying furious glissandos during which his blood flowed down the keyboard as his voice switched from singing to howling and from a silent declamation to a frenzied scream, but in some instances he also literally mounted the instrument as if he were riding a raging bull, reaching his arms inside to bang on the strings. Consequently, the image of such performances of 'taming' became a favourite motif that was omnipresent in the admiring journalistic discourse until the group finally disbanded in 2013. Paradoxically enough, this journalistic motif emerges mostly after 1999, when the atmosphere of the concerts was much calmer and Topol's performance considerably more focused, even in explicit opposition to his former excessiveness. At the turn of the new millennium, these reminiscences functioned as a nostalgic embellishment or rather a memorializing cliché.[43)]

The utterly positive tone has not changed even after more than 30 years of the band's existence as confirmed by the renowned music journalist, Pavel Turek, for whom the band represents a 'unique musical ensemble, whose style has neither predecessors nor successors'. The fact that Psí vojáci had expressed a 'musical aesthetic idiom, incomparable with anyone on the Czech or the world scene,' is to a large degree predicated by the mediated taste of the bandleader who 'has always had an equal admiration for rebellious rock singers and 18th-century classical composers'. 'Out of these incompatible sources,' concludes Turek, 'an original musical form was born, blending a cheeky punk dilettantism with the grandeur of classical music, and existing miles away from pop'.[44)] Along with the accurate description of the band's sound, one might be surprised by another surviving pattern, a judgmental one. Instead of admitting that Psí vojáci were unique *also* due to the fact that a certain pop sensitivity had always been a present element in its career, for most critics 'pop' instead remains as a kind of both aesthetic and ethical object of abjection.

In any case, two different views of the band's multigenre and multi-style musical output can be observed in the journalist discourse. On the one hand, music critics insist on their profound uniqueness and originality, while, on the other, stressing affinities with and similarities to certain transglobal cult stars, primarily John Cale, Tom Waits, Nick Cave, The Doors, Patti Smith, or Lou Reed (and one could easily include musicians such as Jacques Brel, Serge Gainsbourg, Nina Simone, and Screamin' Jay Hawkins). In the context of these oft-repeated analogies, the band appears to embody a highly *glocal* phenomenon,

43) It is by no accident that this surviving motif of 'taming the piano' appeared as a main sequence in the teaser trailer to the recent feature-length documentary film about Filip Topol, *Takovej barevnej vocas letící komety* (A Colourful Tail of a Flying Comet; dir. Václav Kučera, 2015).

44) Pavel Turek, 'Rozetnuté kruhy: proč se rozpadli Psí vojáci, k jejichž hudebnímu projevu nenajdeme srovnání', *Respekt*, vol. 22, no. 34 (2011), p. 58.

which, according to Svetlana Boym, 'uses global language to express local color'.[45] In the discourse of Czech journalism, the glocalness of Psí vojáci thus becomes apparent as a generic synthesis of the global — especially the U.S. independent rock scene, with a touch of French chanson as well as free jazz — and local culture — embedded in the urban poetics of the Czech lyrics, which are suffused with Prague motives and scenes from the hostile periphery.

Even if the band's musical genre is difficult and perhaps pointless to define, the tone of music journalism in the 1990s — as well as that after 2000 which did scarcely more than just recycle previous critical acclaim — itself evokes a certain sense of a genre, an amply eulogistic one. Praise was repeated to such an extent that it, in turn, solidified into a sort of 'ode' or 'paean' that has precluded deeper critical reflection on the band to this day. One of the reasons for the critical consensus is that, instead of providing thorough reviews of the band's recordings with close readings and analyses of both the music and lyrics, the critics seem to have preferred to either interview the charismatic bandleader or to simply reproduce his own words to explain and frame the band's overall output. This peculiar *discursive echo* can be summed up by three interrelated narrative conceptions: raw authenticity; sincere confession; and the romantic restless soul.

Since the very beginning of the 1990s, Topol gave many interviews claiming that his songs were nothing but very personal stories and testimonies, a sort of private and slightly encrypted diary. Thus, in 1991 for instance, he claims: 'I like the new songs a lot because they're terribly personal. And do not want to talk about them that much as I would spoil them… There is a code inside, so whoever wants to can decode it.'[46] Since then, hardly any article about the band has failed to reproduce these words. This statement of alleged authenticity would eventually become a mechanically repeated cliché and an empty incantation, without which it seemed impossible to say anything about the band, and especially about the main 'hero', whose lyrics and musical expression were meant to be nothing more than a genuine and slightly decorated personal testimony. Thus, in the short forward to his interview with Topol in 1992, a journalist from the music journal *Melodie* provides a cue to assure that there is no doubt about the interviewee's true character: 'He sings about people. His lyrics are stories that he lived through or just heard about in gloomy bars, stories about beauty that somehow just disappeared, that is missed but that will certainly emerge.'[47] To be sure, such reiterations do not appear solely in the interviews. Striving to describe the poetics of the album *Brutální lyrika* in 1995, another journalist suggests: 'He begins by making notes on bar receipts […] Topol's songs are said to be encoded diary records.'[48]

45) Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 67. For an insightful account of the process of 'glocalization' of East-Central European music after the fall of Soviet Union see Donna A. Buchanan, 'Sonic Nostalgia: Music, Memory, and Mythography in Bulgaria, 1990–2005', in Maria Todorova, Zsuzsa Gille (eds.), *Post-communist Nostalgia* (Berghahn Books, New York 2013), pp. 129–154.

46) Věra Krincvajová, 'Cejtím se jako pes: rozhovor s Filipem Topolem', *Studentské listy*, vol. 2, no. 7 (1991), p. 3.

47) Milan Ležák ml., 'Připadám si jako ementál (rozhovor s Filipem Topolem)', *Melodie*, vol. 10, no. 30 (1992), p. 12. However, this interview remains one of the most valuable documents addressing both the band's career and its daily life: 'I am used to saying about myself that I feel like a bag of shit. I don't like myself. What the hell should I be proud about? I am terribly lonely. I play all year round, stay in hotels and booze. Everyone wants something from me. I feel like Emmentaler.' Ibid., p. 13.

48) Vladimír Vlasák, 'Psí vojáci jezdí po Čechách s Brutální lyrikou', *Mladá fronta Dnes*, vol. 6, no. 248 (1995), p. 11.

Only rarely have music critics tried to ask different questions than the habitual ones about the bandleader's life story, his wild performances, his heavy drinking, or about particular motifs occurring in his lyrics. Only occasionally did they pose questions that were aimed rather at the procedures beyond the stage and matters beyond the soul. And when this did happen — as was the case with a collective interview for *Rock & Pop* in 1995 in which some of the most respected music journalists of that period attempted to elicit details about the band's promotional strategy and the development of their recent studio recordings — the frontman, authentic under any circumstances, made very clear how he thought the music critics should be concerned with him: 'I have the impression that you keep asking me about that official aspect, a relation between musician and audience. I was never into that, though. The only thing that interests me are the songs, a sort of diary into which I 'come out'.'[49] It is no surprise then, that he cannot admit to one of the main conditions of any artistic expression — stylization: 'I definitely refuse any labeling or image. Any kind of stylization is completely foreign to Psí vojáci. Just look at how we're dressed while playing!'[50] And, again, it is up to journalists to transmit this echo and even amplify it: 'There is not the slightest bit of stylization in their music. Filip Topol plays the way he does because he cannot do otherwise.'[51]

As far as the third leitmotif of journalist discourse is concerned: it stems from a myth deeply rooted in the Romantic conception of authorial genius driven by harsh destiny, whose soul stands as a guarantor of both a truthful and powerful message. If, according to Lawrence Kramer, one of the constant habits of the 19th century was 'assigning emotions expressed in music to the person of the composer, especially if the emotions are painful,'[52] it can be argued that the substitution of 'sincere' personal emotions for the affects streaming from music — a practice common for both the Romantic rhetoric and the discourse of authenticity cherished by the fans, the press, and the music industry during the 1990s — indicates the fundamental principle of anachronism.[53] Thus, when the wild performer Topol continually repeats that he writes and plays only what he experienced in his own skin, the media apparatus functions not only as a reliable echo but also as a hermetically sealed assertion, as is apparent in the following line that appeared in the leading weekly for politics and culture *Respekt* in 1997: 'There is perhaps no other example of a personal and undivided expression of the self and the world in Czech (rock) music, of a compelling interconnection of the expression and intellect, of a close symbiosis between the cult of the poet and the role of the malcontent.'[54]

When reviewing such a unanimous correspondence between Topol's self-presentation and the discursive apparatus of music journalism, it becomes clear that this almost perfect

49) Bezr et al., 'Filip Topol', p. XI.

50) Ležák, 'Připadám si jako ementál', p. 13.

51) Pavel Klusák, 'Na koho z horečky volá Filip Topol?', *Lidové noviny*, vol. 8, no. 273 (1995), p. 12.

52) Lawrence Kramer, 'Wittgenstein, Music, and the Aroma of Coffee: Expression is Description', in *Expression and Truth: On the Music of Knowledge* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), p. 17.

53) The rhetoric of authenticity could also function as a crucial discursive constituent of the transition, an 'apparent link between requirements of dissent and the majority population.' Michal Pullmann, *Konec experimentu: přestavba a pád komunismu v Československu* (Praha: Scriptorium, 2011), p. 186.

54) Jiří Peňás, 'Umělec ve vývoji', *Respekt*, vol. 8, no. 19 (1997), p. 19.

echo does not stem from Topol's brilliantly stylized lyrics or the band's original sound and compositions, but instead from the bandleader's constantly repeated 'ontological narrative'. Since the sociological term denotes a scenario that serves to define its own identity and to explain the story of one's life,[55] it seems to match the bandleader's chief endeavor to preserve and disseminate the image and discourse of authenticity.[56] A successful effort, indeed, since Topol's 'ontological narrative' — which highlighted his underground beginnings and the unbending rhetoric of authenticity, as well as his affection for composers of the 18th century and fondness for alcohol — continuously pervaded the 1990s and persisted further, in only slight variations, until his death in 2013. As a result, this narrative, repeatedly reproduced and enhanced by Post-Velvet Revolution journalism, constitutes the dominant framework for explaining the whole phenomenon of Psí vojáci. Neither the unique poetry of Topol's lyrics, nor the exceptional music of the band, but rather the mesmerizing *story*, indivisible from the self-destructive performances, is what lies at the heart of its local reception, and what substantially shaped not only the demands of the audience, yearning for authenticity, but also the order for a retrospective 'greatest hits' album from the music industry.

IV. Becoming Cult: From Self-Revival Practices to the Transparent Symbol

In addition to constituting a promotional step by delivering recordings of 'the greatest hits', the Indies Records album reveals an implicit strategy towards an affirmation of the band's own fame, reputation, and popularity; a strategy that was perhaps not entirely decoded, but definitely very well accepted by both their old and new fans, who were seeking to reconcile the old 'underground' content with the current Post-Velvet Revolution turmoil. However, this album still did not achieve anything close to the success of the contemporary pop and rock mainstream. As Lawrence Grossberg observed, being popular in the context of rock music does not necessarily leads to commercial success;[57] and the success which alternative bands like Psí vojáci achieved, had, in fact, a different form. For the vast majority of Czech musicians in the 1990s who did not operate with one of the large transnational labels and did not fill giant sport halls and stadiums, their musical production amounted to either a negligible extra income or a minimal income close to a subsistence wage. For the band that embodied the club scene of the late 1980s and early 1990s,

55) See Margaret R. Somers, 'The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach', *Theory and Society*, vol. 23, no. 5 (1994), p. 618, where she defines ontological narratives as 'the stories that social actors use to make sense of — indeed, to act in — their lives. Ontological narratives are used to define who we *are;* this in turn can be a precondition for knowing what to *do*'.

56) Authenticity as a fundamental criterion of both the rock aesthetics and ethics is far too complex a topic to be just briefly summarized here. I can therefore only refer to Wade Hollingshaus, drawing on Lawrence Grossberg, Simon Frith, and Philippe Auslander, who suggests that instead of creating 'an ontological situation in which its practitioners enter their authentic selves […], rock practice is actually only the performance of authenticity.' Wade Hollingshaus, *Philosophizing Rock Performance: Dylan, Hendrix, Bowie* (Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press, 2013), p. 125.

57) Lawrence Grossberg, 'Is There Rock after Punk?', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1986), p. 53.

during which time it even filled the Great Hall of Lucerna Palace (with a capacity of circa 2500 persons) and played gigs in foreign clubs in Budapest, Vienna, Berlin but also in various towns in Holland, France, and Belgium, the two main sources of livelihood were sales profits from albums — which were financially close to zero — and concert revenues.

Each year, Psí vojáci toured exhaustingly, playing several times a week more or less the same songs in the same or slightly modified order. Furthermore, they performed at all sorts of clubs and halls in so-called 'kulturáky' (cultural houses) in larger or smaller towns, where a well-tuned piano together with a high-quality sound system and a willing professional soundman were a rarity; typically, what awaited the musicians in these venues was the exact opposite. In summer they played performances that were no less demanding at numerous music festivals, whose organizers were scarcely able to provide the band appropriate technical conditions. It is thus worth noting that during the time of their gradually increasing popularity, Psí vojáci managed to play circa 75 concerts a year, comprised of tour dates, individual gigs, and festivals in the Czech Republic and abroad.[58)]

It is, therefore, clear that the main source of the band's appeal was not the recordings but their live performances. These live shows did not provide for the band any kind of mass popularity or any sort of celebrity 'high life', but thanks to them the band did attain a *cult* status and hence achieved enormous, albeit not commercial, success. The 1996 album full of smash hits, which were regularly performed during concerts, ultimately did nothing less than enhance their cult status, which consisted of, to use Hennion's words, 'a fusion between musical objects and the needs of the public'.[59)] To put it differently, the cult status of the band had a double origin; firstly, it was rooted in the band's mythical underground past; secondly, this status was made possible by the post-underground fans across different generations who tended to identify with the lyrics and tunes that they perceived as possessing a clear symbolic message.

Even though the bandleader sharply denied any flirtation or affiliation with the world of 'glamorous' and 'commercial' pop,[60)] a certain recognition of celebrity status — which, after all, the band did attain in the post-Velvet Revolution era — explicitly emerged in the group's audiovisual production, albeit cunningly and in a playfully hyperbolic manner. Towards the end of the highly self-parodying and bricolage-like music video entitled 'Irská balada' (The Irish Ballad, 1992)[61)] a wall covered with stars alluding to the Hollywood Walk of Fame appears, which includes stars containing the names U2, Iggy Pop, R.E.M.,

58) Interview with L. Horký, 2. 11. 2016, in Prague.

59) Antoine Hennion, 'The Production of Success: An Anti-Musicology of the Pop Song', *Popular Music*, vol. 3, no. 3 (Producers and Markets) (1983), p. 163.

60) With only one exception: when asked directly in an interview in 2006, 'How about trying something commercial, just for extra money?' he replied openly: 'One day, someone offered me to make music for a bank ad. There was quite a lot of money in that. So I recorded the stuff on the piano in Akropolis club. After a week, he showed up again saying that they gave it back to him, because they found it awfully sad. This was my only attempt.' (See Krystyna Wanatowiczová, 'Čekání na kopanec (rozhovor s Filipem Topolem)', *Týden*, vol. 13, no. 33 (2006), p. 44.

61) In a similar vein, the short, playfully bricolage-like documentary series entitled *Sbohem a bedna* (Goodbye and Telly), directed by David Sís and Ivo Trajkov and produced by Česká televize (Czech TV) in 1992, is set in a TV studio where the band members, dressed in bizarre costumes, comment on both their musical production and the simultaneous shooting and, in a highly improvisation manner, re-enact their own songs.

Suzanne Vega and many others, while a star with the name Psí vojáci, realized with a modest visual trick, emerges among them. In hindsight, the self-irony of such a motif might be easily read as both a telling commentary and prediction of the band's position during the 1990s. Sharing many features with global rock music stars, the band could have basked in the glory of international fame, but instead it remained a glocal star whose recognition scarcely crossed the frontiers of its Czech homeland.

However, the sarcastic self-reflection on its own glocal cult status led to a quite different image of the band that can be traced back to the period when the famous 'greatest hits' were made, i.e. the second half of the 1980s, an image that quickly faded with professionalization, concert routines, and touring. It needs to be emphasized that besides their tragic tone and characteristic combination of pathos and urban romanticism, Psí vojáci also engaged in a much more playful, ironic, and grotesque form of expression, grounded in black humor, that was far less serious and exalted — even though it was largely overlooked by music critics. In addition to being heard in the punk-like songs 'V koupelně je vana' (There is a Bathtub in the Bathroom) and 'Šeptáme si na rohu' (At the Corner We Do Whisper), both from the album *Mučivé vzpomínky* (Torturing Memories: Works from 1987–1989; released 1997), these comic qualities arose especially during the live performances. This is for example the case with the never released song 'Přišel jsem z práce' (I Came Home from Work, circa 1987; available on YouTube), which exists in various concert recordings, a frolicsome combination of a tune that evokes the mob film genre and Topol's strongly improvised lyrics telling of three completely crazed telephone calls, in which the bandleader is threatened and seduced; the text explicitly alludes to the poetics of Raymond Chandler.

An even higher degree of irony is displayed in a piece entitled 'Průřez tvorbou' (The Overview), which was recorded at the very end of 1989 in the Prosek club in Prague: a 3:30 minute long *montage* of choruses from the band's most famous songs — the very same songs (with the exception of the 'Psycho Killer') that are found on the 'greatest hits' album — but, with a crucial modification: all of them are accompanied by machine-like drums playing the same four-four rhythm over and over again. This technique of a ludic and playfully subversive self-reproduction, a sort of 'self-radio Psí vojáci', provides a moment of light-heartedness, a self-parodying principle, and a postmodern impulse to which the band would not return and which was largely overshadowed by the later nostalgic bias of both the audiences and journalists. Curiously though, this song demonstrates that the *self-revival* had already taken place long before the Indies Records 'best of', but whereas the former places the smash hits into a highly postmodern form of sampling which, according to Ross Harley (drawing on Roland Barthes and Simon Frith), embodies a 'postmodern musical equivalent to the death of the author',[62] the latter focuses exclusively on the auctorial tragic and romantic undertone — most emblematically embedded in the famous song 'Žiletky' — which was, along with the commercial goals, the main purpose of the 1996 release.[63]

62) Ross Harley, 'Beat in the System', in Tony Bennett, Simon Frith, Lawrence Grossberg, John Shepherd, Graeme Turner (eds.), *Rock and Popular Music: Politics, Policies, Institutions* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 209.

63) Interview with L. Horký, 2. 11. 2016, in Prague.

Reconsidering the symbolic exploitation of the music industry, the journalistic echo, the fan's desire for the underground past, and the contradictory practices of the band, one might suggest that the outlined cultural short-circuits are produced by several disruptions between the 'input circuit' and the 'output circuit', that is, in the communication between the stage and the audience, driven by the much longed-for authenticity and frustrated expectations. These conflicting dialogues reveal an insurmountable difference between, on the one hand, the impersonal affects of pathos and self-destruction — which Topol produces and transmits towards the audience across, through, and by means of his spellbinding performance, music, and lyrics — and, on the other hand, the comprehensible emotions with which the spectators and listeners could easily identify.[64] Instead of perceiving the frontman as a signifier or rather a *medium* of his unique style, those who listened to and watched him, 'read' him as a final signified, a clear message, *mediated* by his performance. As a result, the music and lyrics became for the audience a merely transparent symbol, unequivocally referring to Filip Topol himself.

Conclusion: A New Party with an Old Playlist

In her excellent chapter on the afterlife of different underground bands after the fall of the Iron Curtain in Hungary, Anna Szemere offers a similar view as that seen in the Czech(oslovak) context when she describes how the Hungarian situation led to a 'post-Socialist melancholia — detectable less in the songs than in the musician's reflections and daily struggles — hinged on remembering a way of life that enabled them to become the spokespersons, if not heroes, of the generation.'[65] At the first glance, the difference between the two contexts might appear clear-cut. In the Czech context, the nostalgic tendencies are to be attributed mainly to the music industry, audiences, and journalists who reduced a progressive and experimental musical ensemble to an underground monument of the pre-Velvet Revolution era, whereas, according to Szemere's description, the major actors of such an anachronism in Hungary are the very artists whose nostalgia, after the carnivalesque years of transition passed, 'became bound up with a new kind of anxiety about how to handle the underground legacy in the context of market competition, commoditization, and fragmentation.'[66] But the contrast is not, in fact, that sharp, because Psí vojáci themselves also contributed a great deal toward the solidification of the sense of post-underground nostalgia, and did so through a — however perhaps unintentional — gesture aimed at widely shared and highly symbolic values.

On the occasion of their twentieth anniversary in November 1999, a huge celebration concert was held in the sold-out Great Hall of Lucerna Palace. The concert lasted almost

64) For a discussion of the term 'affect' in terms of the relational 'energetic intensity' which is 'always the result of an interaction between a work and its beholder' and differs from purely subjective emotions and personal feelings see Ernst van Alphen, 'Affective Operations of Art and Literature', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 53–54 (2008), pp. 21–30.

65) Anna Szemere, 'The Velvet Prison in Hindsight: Artistic Discourse in Hungary in the 1990s', in Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille (eds.), *Post-communist Nostalgia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), p. 246.

66) Szemere, 'The Velvet Prison in Hindsight', p. 259.

four hours, during which the band played the majority of their repertoire from the 1980s and early 1990s. More importantly, it was opened by a short greeting from the loudspeakers and the voice belonged to none other than the icon of the Velvet Revolution and contemporary president, Václav Havel. Havel was not only partly responsible for stimulating the foundation of the band, but he also embodied a significant link between Czech underground community and political dissent, which, among many other things, led to the drafting of Charter 77.[67] So, while the band's musical production was defined by the intense and experimental years of the 1990s transition, its discourse, promotion, and nostalgic gestures positioned it, at the very peak of its creative boom, in a *retro* mode.

The anachronistic pattern, however, discloses another facet or, rather, historical condition. Despite the temporal correspondence of both cultural phenomena, it becomes clear that 'post-underground' has quite little in common with the post-socialist comeback of postmodernism in terms of a 'radical eclecticism' and distrust towards the grand narratives of legitimation.[68] Quite the contrary; if Wolfgang Welsch famously claimed in 1987, that postmodernism is neither 'anti-modern' nor 'post-modern' but 'radically modern',[69] the post-underground stance toward the band, detectable in the critical acclaim, the label policies, and the audience's nostalgic requests, constitutes a peculiar set of attitudes that approve new constellations and circumstances only on the condition that the old content remains preserved and untouched. Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as 'rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress'[70] and the the post-underground attitude operated precisely in this manner. However, Boym differentiates between the 'restorative' form of nostalgia that relies on historical truth, national traditions, and collectively shared symbols, and 'reflective' nostalgia, which creates a specific narrative 'that savors details and memorial signs' and tends to be ironic and fragmentary.[71] 'Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time.'[72]

It would perhaps be too hasty to classify the post-underground nostalgia as either restorative or reflective since it shares some features of both. Rather than striving for a reconstruction of a vanished past, it cherishes 'the patina' of those days when underground was a far cry from just a retro brand, relying purely on the symbolic meanings of the iconic band, while neglecting its desire for transformation, full of irony and contradictions. As a result, the old songs, memories and narratives, the visual and sonic atmosphere of the past unbendingly surrounding and ultimately binding the band, prevail over its contem-

67) For more details see Bolton, 'Legends of the Underground', in *Worlds of Dissent*, pp. 115–151.

68) For Peter Zusi it is more appropriate, in the context of the Central Europe, to talk about 'Second World postmodernism' since although during the 1990s 'the former Eastern Bloc witnessed an efflorescence of self-consciously or recognizably postmodern production,' this occurred 'right at the time when the term was losing its aura in Western Europe and the United States.' Peter Zusi, 'History's Loose Ends: Imagining the Velvet Revolution', in Dariusz Afijczuk and Derek Sayer (eds.), *The Inhabited Ruins of Central Europe: Re-imagining Space, History, and Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 235, 241.

69) Wolfgang Welsch, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne* [1987] (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter), 2008, p. 6.

70) Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xv.

71) Ibid., pp. 41–55.

72) Ibid., p. 41.

porary production in the 1990s. The main trigger of the anachronistic splits and tensions between production and reception was thus the post-underground nostalgia that was 'constructed' by the conservative audience, the music industry, and journalists, who pressed the current production of the band into the underground frame, but also cultivated by the band's media emphasis on so-called authenticity.[73] Rather than a naïve or selective listening, the post-underground receptive mode turns up as an anti-postmodern mislistening, driven by conservative bias and a nostalgic desire to find a past and safe (no matter how illegal) experience under the current and eclectic (no matter how free) present. Such a view from behind the scenes of the proverbial wild party of the post-Velvet Revolution era thus begs some questions as to who was actually willing to change the playlist and whether the newcomers were even welcome.

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Films cited:
Sbohem a bedna (David Sís and Ivo Trajkov, 1992), *Takovej barevnej vocas letící komety* (Václav Kučera, 2015).

73) Although in the quite different context of the American 1960s, Deena Weinstein makes a similar point when, drawing on Fredric Jameson, she uncovers the 'neo-nostalgia' for rock's golden age as an imaginary and highly aestheticized construct of communication media that is 'fabricated for corporate profit and generational/parental power'. Deena Weinstein, 'Constructed Nostalgia for Rock's Golden Age: "I Believe in Yesterday"', *Volume!*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2014), pp. 19–36.

SUMMARY

Charting Post-Underground Nostalgia

Anachronistic Practices of the Post-Velvet Revolution Rock Scene

Tomáš Jirsa

The 1990s music scene in East-Central Europe has often been described as a melting pot of various genres wherein different official and unofficial musicians from the socialist era merged with all kinds of contemporary Western impulses. This begs the question: did all those new influences necessarily lead to a change of taste and expectations among audiences or even to a change in the music industry's policies? In contrast to the popular narrative of the dynamic post-Velvet Revolution transformation of culture and society, this essay offers a contrasting view of a particularly anachronistic tendency that unfolded during the transition, the mover of which was a conservative post-underground audience that longed much less for novelty than for continuity and survival of the cultural and aesthetic patterns of the normalization period. Following a case study of the Czech alternative rock band Psí vojáci (Dog Soldiers) and pointing out several paradoxes that framed and determined its musical production and reception, the goal of the essay is to examine the socio-cultural mechanisms underlying the anachronistic and nostalgic stance that substantially shaped the post-socialist musical landscape. In doing so, it also explains the role of the audience, the music industry, and journalists whose attitude led to a stereotypical branding of the band as an 'underground legend,' a reduction that was only intensified by the business strategy of the band's leading label, Indies Records. Drawing on the sociological approach to rock music and music industry studies, this study exposes the contradictory nature of the anti-commercialism myth of alternative music culture.