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Communism with Its Clothes Off: Eastern European Film Comedy and the Grotesque

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by

Lilla Tőke

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Abstract of the Dissertation

Communism with Its Clothes Off: Eastern European Film Comedy and the Grotesque

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The dissertation examines the legacies of grotesque comedy in the cinemas of Eastern Europe. The absolute non-seriousness that characterized grotesque realism became a successful and relatively safe way to talk about the absurdities and the failures of the communist system. This modality, however, was not exclusive to the communist era but stretched back to the Austro-Hungarian era and forward into the Postcommunist times. The analysis explores how film comedy provided a second, carnivalesque world that mirrored official culture in a grotesque way and ridiculed it, and as such these comedies indicated the failure of the Grand Narrative of Communism. The films constituted a much-needed alternative public sphere, where the controversies and absurdities in the dominant social structures could emerge in a critical light. They demystified the workings of state communism in two important ways: first, they revealed that ideological and material reality were incongruous and often contradictory and that

the illusion of ideological reality was forcefully maintained through language. Secondly, the films disclosed that the communist state's biopolitics was ultimately unsuccessful since it failed to fully integrate the individuals into its ideological project and instead encouraged a particular "doublethink" to emerge (where people simultaneously accepted and defied communist control over their bodies). Ultimately, in its carnivalesque representations, Eastern European cinema performed an important counter-cultural function that commented on the very ontology of existing socialism: the films pointed to an irreconcilable contradiction between communist ideology and material reality that would ultimately lead to the system's demise as well as the state's aggressive attempts and failures to interpellate its subjects fully and successfully.

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of my father, Csaba Tőke, who is long gone, but who remains my role model and imaginary, ideal reader. His journalism taught me how language becomes a weapon if handled with care and used with force.

Introduction

"*Every tool is a weapon if you hold it right*." Ani DiFranco

György Konrád, the famous Hungarian writer of communist resistance told the following story at a roundtable discussion in 1990.

> A long time ago I lived in a village and in this village there was a butcher. His house was on the street corner and the street was on an incline. In the proximity of this village there was a military base. Once, while the butcher's wife was in the bedroom changing sheets, a tank came through the wall into the room because the road was icy, slippery, and the front of the house was destroyed. […] The next time I saw the butcher I asked him what happened. "History came in," he said. Probably that's a typical relationship of people with history; they don't jump in but history jumps in. (92-93)

I find this anecdote to encapsulate not only the nature of Eastern Europeans' encounter with history, but also the characteristic humor with which they react every time the "tank of history" comes through the wall. My curiosity about the comic interpretations of Eastern European communist reality was initially triggered by my discovery of the large number and considerable popularity of certain film comedies produced in the most restless times of state socialism (from the 1960s onwards). These comedies became a permanent part of the cultural vocabulary and are now often referred to as "cult comedies" or "cult classics." I was eager to understand why it is that, despite the widely differing socialist realities that developed in the region during the second half of the twentieth century, we can still identify a shared sense of humor that even today persists—particularly in its cinema. Ultimately, my goal was to unravel this unique comic

phenomenon and to examine what it shows us about the communist societies that produced it.

Before I can address these questions, I need to justify my use of the term "Eastern Europe." All discussions about the region's cultural history have to start with and are often stymied by terminological and conceptual problems. There are countless debates about what modifier best describes the geopolitical entity I will address in this dissertation.[1] Is it better to talk about "east", "central" or "east-central" Europe? According to what parameters do we define the region: historical, political, linguistic, or economical? There is significant disagreement about where to draw the geographical borders, which countries to include and which to exclude from the list. Some argue that Eastern Europe is a thing of the past altogether since most countries are now part of the European Union. Others never wanted to be associated with the "east" because the term connotes "backwardness" and "marginalization." At the bottom of this predicament lies an uncertainty about what exactly holds together this group of countries in view of their multiethnic, multilingual, multi-religious character.

The argument for a shared historical and cultural experience in Eastern Europe is not to deny that the forty years of top down communism in the region produced a diverse set of political realities. No doubt each country shows somewhat different political and economic development. The institutional breakdowns and attempts of economic restructuring as well as the responses to political conflicts varied widely in the region. Yet, I claim that "Eastern Europe" will be a productive conceptual framework for this

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[1] For details on the problems with the region's terminological definition see Ash, Bojtár, Wandycz, Tötösy de Zepetnek, Wolff, Janowski, Ryszka, Hanley, Kundera, Rupnik, Bugge, Fehér, Fried, Graubard, and Okey.

analysis because it helps draw out a hitherto overlooked cultural phenomenon that clearly overflows the conceptual boundaries of "the nation." The notion of "Eastern Europe" can be used productively if understood, according to Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek's definition, as a "landscape of culture(s) comprising of real or imagined (i.e. Anderson's concept) and variable similarities of shared histories, cultural practices, institutions, social and behavioral similarities, etc." (8). One important goal of this work therefore is to salvage "Eastern Europe" as a useful category for cultural analysis in an increasingly national or global scholarly discourse and to claim that the regional framework can bring light to otherwise indiscernible cultural trends.

Since I recognize that culture stands in a dialectical relationship with history, I interpret the prevalence of the comic vein in the cinemas of Poland, Hungary, ex-Yugoslavia, and ex-Czechoslovakia as *definitive* for the region. In other words, by describing comedy as a *transnational* trend, I intend to make a geopolitical argument, because I believe that the presence of the comedies as cultural artifacts are just as important markers of the region as its political and economic history. But my dialectical perspective also provides a historical explanation for the emergence of the film comedies recognizing that culture is always "embedded in an ideological [and artistic] matrix" (Griffin 188). The 1960s can be identified as the cradle of the comedy of resistance in Eastern European cinema because the decade was wrought with political, social, and cultural change. After Stalin's death and following Nikita Khruschev's famous "Secret Speech" at the twentieth Party Congress in 1956, most Eastern European countries experienced some sort of social upheaval starting with Hungary and followed by Poland and Czechoslovakia. They sought "real socialism, [in] a radical attempt by embittered

and disillusioned workers and intelligentsia to bring about a more authentic socialist revolution" (Bideleux 532). Unfortunately, each reform movement was cut short by domestic political rivalry and by Soviet intervention. The Prague Spring of 1968, just like the Hungarian revolution and the Polish reform movements earlier (1956), was forcefully halted and even reversed due to Soviet intervention. Yugoslavia, under Tito's rule, was relatively stable, but it was isolated from its immediate neighbors and suffered under a strong dictatorship.

There is no space here for a detailed description of the different communist societies in Eastern Europe, which were considerably complex and distinct from one another. But I will summarize what I see as relevant for my argument with the help of Katherine Verdery's (2002) concise and enlightening essay on the anthropology of socialist societies. After 1945, all Eastern European countries integrated the idea of "permanent revolution" into everyday life. The means of production were nationalized and centrally controlled by a single (Communist or Socialist) Party in power. Although after World War II, when most of these societies became socialist, they lagged behind the West in terms of industrial technology, urbanization, and economic wealth, state propaganda promised that centralized development, through five year planning, would lead to quick progress and that the socialist societies would eventually overtake the West. But after a short booming period, each country's economy collapsed resulting in acute political crises.

The strict hierarchies in centralized power could not adapt flexibly to the needs of the population, and this failure eventually resulted in permanent *economic shortage*. Consequently, a second, unofficial, shadow economy appeared, connected but not

exclusive to black-markets, which were often the only way to obtain basic goods and services. The informal economic relations developed in parallel with the state economy, and were based on personal connections, favoritism, gifts, and exchange of goods. Furthermore, the authorities obsessively controlled the flow of all information: they meticulously collected sociological data, but also modified them to fit the preconceived ideological goals. Censorship was implemented in direct and indirect ways shaping all spheres of communist art and media. The Party officials modified language to emphasize a utopian future and to ignore the dismal present; their language relied on "hierarchic speech with reduced vocabularies, clusters of noun phrases, and few (often passive) verbs, creating a limited, static verbal world" (Verdery 9), which resulted in free-floating rhetoric without any tie to the realities of everyday life. Such depiction of the communist linguistic disarticulation is in fact one of the hallmarks of the films I will discuss below.

All-encompassing projects of social engineering were also implemented to create "the new socialist man." The communist subject was a quintessential "docile" subject regulated through what Michael Foucault calls "biopower" defined as "the numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (140). The communist state's biopolitics was perpetual and aggressive; it penetrated people's most intimate, everyday lives in often damaging ways. Communist hegemony depended on docile bodies that could be inserted into the "machinery of [both] production" (141) and reproduction. For instance, all women were obliged to enter the work force as a sign of their social equality; production and birth rates were controlled and prescribed by the state; official holidays and state rituals were compulsory and meticulously orchestrated. Children were initiated into the Party's political structure at

the earliest age, while their parents were forced to attend union meetings, weekend seminars on communist ideology and to volunteer for overtime. I suggest that the seemingly docile communist bodies were in fact a primary site of contestation between the individual and the state. The comedies' preoccupation with the bodily and the physical is evidence of the ongoing struggle and failure of the Communist Party to fully win over individual subjects for its cause.

The oppressive mechanisms of communist biopower in combination with the dismal conditions of everyday life resulted in a "dissimulation" and "doubling" (Verdery 11) on the side of the population. This meant that people adopted a mechanism of "doublethink" characteristic to Eastern Europe that helped self-preservation because it feigned compliance while in reality it often meant resistance to ideological interpellation. Václav Havel's "greengrocer; a modest ordinary man" in communist totalitarianism became "profoundly indifferent towards the official ideology" (Žižek 2001: 90), and instead turned his attention to alternative sources of information and alternative ways of expression. The film comedies were such cultural reserves to which the profoundly disillusioned and increasingly skeptical subjects could turn in order to communicate their frustrations through comedy and laughter.

One goal of the reformist movements in the 1950s and again in the 1960s was to unveil the above-mentioned incongruities and distortions and to bring communist ideology closer to political and economic realities. But the political crises resulted in aggressive and volatile attempts to repress the revolts and to halt the reformist movements. In order to keep control, the "dictatorship of bureaucracy over society" (Havel in Berend 1996: 155) took extreme forms. Unable to adapt to technological

advances, to obtain the ideological devotion of the intelligentsia, or to recover economically, the leadership of each country settled for passive compliance and silent dissent. What eventually led to the communist state's demise, I believe, was the collapse of its biopolitics: it could no longer produce the conviction necessary to sustain communist ideology against the material reality that was continuously deteriorating. As the gap between ideology and reality grew wider the moment came when people refused to act according to the logic of doublethink.

The above described particularities of Eastern European communism can be defined in Marxist terms as a fatal separation between *base* and *superstructure* that became undeniable by the end of the 1960s. Marx wrote in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that, "the mode of production of material life [base], conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general [superstructure]." Marx's historical materialism insisted that the material base always determined social consciousness. Marxist cultural theorists later complicated and revised this statement in a truly dialectical manner arguing that base and superstructure influence each other and work together as a whole. The Eastern European communist societies have, however, steadfastly contradicted both Marx's initial statement and its later revisions. First, it is well recognized today that the material conditions in the region (as I pointed out earlier) were in no way ready to produce a socialist society. In fact quite the opposite happened: the declaration of the socialist political system meant that its ideology was forced onto the existing economic conditions. The socialist subject and his/her values, beliefs, and characteristics were first announced and then generated in a top down fashion. But the

films expose the serious complications and breakdowns in the prescriptive mechanisms of the communist Ideological State Apparatuses (Louis Althusser).

Second, and maybe more importantly, base and superstructure never came into synch with each other in the fifty years of communist history. In fact the initial distance between communist ideology and economic reality froze into an irresolvable internal contradiction that resulted in chronic political and economic crises. The disconnection between reality and ideology was a definite characteristic of the ontology of socialism. It was this "dichotomization of the world" (Verdery 11)—the schizophrenic split within the self (doublethink) and between dominant ideology and material reality—that found its artistic outlet in the unique, comic cinemas of Eastern Europe during communism. A particular sense of humor translated the collective, quiet traumas[2] of communist life into an approachable, digestible and laughable matter. Against the official communist culture that thrived on deception and contradictions, various forms of joke-telling provided a vital alternative—a collective counter-culture.

No doubt, the biggest challenge while writing the dissertation was to find the common ground and the adequate vocabulary to describe the films' diverse comic mode in coherent and systematic ways. Despite the prevalence and popularity of comedy, I was surprised to find very little comprehensive and comparative scholarly work done on this aesthetic mode in the region's cinematic production. The existing scholarship largely overlooks the transnational aspect of comedy and focuses either on individual films (reviews, short critical pieces) or discusses them strictly within a national tradition (e.g.

[2] For a detailed discussion on the question of "quiet traumas" see Kaplan 2005.

Czech New Wave cinema).[3] Overall, I found that scholars of Eastern European cinema tend to prefer "serious"—tragic and melodramatic—"high art" and either dismiss comedy as straightforward, "popular cinema" or else see it not in its own right but as part of a larger aesthetic movement (such as New Wave cinema). In either case, comedy is generally seen as a transparent mode of expression that needs very little scholarly exploration.

Yvette Biró is one of the few exceptions. Her short essay from the 1980s, "Pathos and Irony in East European Films" was published in an important collection of essays entitled *Politics, Art and Commitment in the East European Cinema* (ed. David B. Paul, 1983). This work is unique in drawing attention to a general turn towards the comic as a representational mode in the region's post-World War II cinema that replaced tragedy and pathos as dominant forms of storytelling. Biró outlines three trends of comic perception in the Eastern European cinema: "A certain meaningful smile that illuminates human helplessness and perplexity", the "biting humor, savagely pitying blasphemy and the murderous weapons of black comedy", and finally, the "guerilla operation—the open, subversive attack against all rigid social systems" (Biró 37-38). She also identifies common traits of the distinctive styles, which together make up an ironic modality representing the communist world. The wide range of comic formations, she claims, move around the following themes: banality, anti-heroism, survival, irrationality, carnival, and liberation through bodily pleasure and fantasy. Biró's categorization and regional approach are indeed pioneering and accurate.

[3] On humor in Polish film see Skatorczak and Talarcyk and on the theme of Hungarian comedy see Hirsch and Libor; on Czech cinema see Hames.

Biró herself uses the term "irony" to define the increasingly dominant comic aesthetic in the 1960s. Irony implies "double meaning," a discrepancy in expression and intention, which places the speaker at a certain distance from his/her subject. In my research, I came across several other denominators such as "black humor", "dark comedy", "satire", "the absurd", or "mock realism" (Charles Eidsvik) all of which seemed relevant in one way or another when analyzing particular comedies. But I was not convinced that in and by themselves any of these terms described the comic tradition in Eastern European cinema accurately. None brought me closer to understanding my initial question that asked why humor was such a pronounced representational modality in Eastern Europe and what position the films occupied vis-à-vis the political system that produced them. The films indeed vary considerably in their style, theme, and even in the scale and nature of their humor. Yet, I also felt that they shared something in common. They all deployed comedy to reveal the paradoxical nature of communist existence.

Finally, Mikhail Bakhtin's work on grotesque realism and the carnival gave me the analytical key to unlock the intricacies of laughter and politics in Eastern European cinema. As critics have noted, the concepts of carnival and grotesque realism, which Bakhtin developed in his book, *Rabelais and His World,* resonated in contemporary Stalinist Russia. Bakhtin profited greatly from the allegory of Rabelais' art in medieval France to critically engage with the atrocious official culture in Stalin's soviet Russia. The similarities between the historical reality in Bakhtin's time and in communist Eastern Europe thirty years later make this comparison less arbitrary than it appears at first.

Carnival, for Bakhtin, is a gay and liberating spectacle and a separate, second world that opposes and perverts the official culture through "the laws of its own freedom"

(Bakhtin 7). It is a "temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life" (15) that turns repressive, official culture inside out. Disciples as well as critics of Bakhtin have problematized this obviously utopian and binary description of the medieval world. Some, like Renate Lachman (1987), claim that the carnival is embedded in official culture, and therefore it works as a sublimation of social tensions rather than an inversion. Others, like Simon Denith (1994), question the positive, regenerating element of carnival laughter and point out that in fact it often has a "sardonic and negative" (69) element.

A transparent application of Bakhtin's theory to Eastern European reality certainly calls for caution. But communism did share one defining characteristic with medieval society, namely its "two world condition" (Bakhtin 6), its duplicity. The separation between the official and unofficial worlds, where the former overdetermined the latter, often in paradoxical ways, was a central trait of both societies. I see Bakhtin's description of the carnival to be instructive when trying to understand how these comedies engaged with communist reality. Of course, we are not talking about concrete manifestations of the carnival (festivals, etc), but of the cinematic image as a carnivalesque *representation/reflection* of the official communist world. Bakhtin claims that the carnival is "life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play" (7). My analysis takes on this statement to delineate how the comedies were linked to reality: their carnivalesque representational mode generated a second, fictional world in which the first, official world could be turned inside out, parodied, exaggerated, and mocked. But the question remains: Why was the carnivalesque representation of reality such a

cherished way to express the paradoxes of communist existence and why was the grotesque the most appropriate response to communism in so many of these films?

Carnival was a very effective way to represent communist life because it proposed a radical and subversive restructuring of the world that revealed the contradictions in the system but through a mask of absolute non-seriousness (Kundera 2003: 48-49). It presented communism as “a world inside out” (Bakhtin 11) by blurring the boundaries between normal and abnormal, high utopian ideals and their travesties, and between sacred rituals and ludicrous mockeries. As such, the carnivalesque images in cinema held a mirror up to the communist utopia as it was falling apart showing it for what it was: a perverse, dystopian reality where law was flexible, irrationality functioned as the norm, and where fools were often elected as kings.

My use of the term “grotesque“ also builds on Bakhtin’s dialectical analysis of medieval French culture where he defines the grotesque in terms of “degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” (Bakhtin 19). But the concept of “grotesque” finds a metaphorical extension in the comedies where “degradation” is used in the widest possible sense referring to a specific reordering of the world that “defies our categorical expectations concerning the natural and ontological order” (Carroll 297). In other words, the films’ grotesque element is not exhausted in the way that they construct the body as subversive in its deformations. In their grotesque representations the films reconfigure communist ontology in terms of debasement, degradation of categorical expectations, and the inversion of anything “holy” in the dominant culture.

Linda Williams and Christine Gledhill’s description of melodrama as an “operative mode” (Williams 42) and an “elastic environment of signs” (Gledhill 240)

rather than a genre strictly speaking, encouraged me to employ Bakhtin's "grotesque realism" as an analytical category for my work. Following their reasoning, I propose here that we look at grotesque comedy as a deeply dialectical aesthetic category (Gledhill) rather than a genre in Eastern European cinema. Similar to melodrama, grotesque comedy should be seen as an "aesthetic and epistemological mode" (Williams 48), as a structuring principle that reorganizes the world according to its own parameters, into a carnival that makes the boundaries between fictional and social imaginaries fluid (Gledhill 240). The films' grotesque imagery, by exposing the system's distortion and contradictions, provoked a liberating laughter that freed the self from the constraints of official regulation and desecrated the utopian idealism of communist ideology.

The grotesque and the carnivalesque emerged as prevalent aesthetic representations because structurally they corresponded to the duplicities and travesties that were perceived as characteristic of communism itself. This comic modality centers on desecration, which was key in challenging the absolute seriousness of official culture. The carnivalesque world in the films held a comic and realistic mirror up to the relationship between communist ideology and reality that seemed to have been turned on its head.

The carnivalesque world in Eastern European cinema is often more macabre than what Bakhtin celebrated as the joyful carnival depicting social and political structures in absurd and reversed ways. One instance where we can observe a macabre tone of the Eastern European grotesque is in its strong infusion of the *absurd*. The absurdist quality (that focuses on incongruity and dissonance) combines the Eastern European grotesque folkloric tradition with modernist, avant-garde practices. In Chapter 1 of the dissertation I

argue that, in the films discussed, the absurd provides the realist aspect of the grotesque. I justify my claim by showing that the absurd, which relies on incongruity, irrationality, and discordance mimetically reproduces the discrepancies between communist ideology and material reality. The absurd reduces the paradoxes of the communist political system into an accessible and laughable matter. It draws out the incongruous relation between categorical expectations (the logical, natural order of things, or how things should be) and reality (how things are), which is a precise aesthetic reflection of the communist endeavor.

Hence, the films reveal the very ontology of communism, its aggressive attempts for successful performativity—to force ideology onto material reality and onto the body. But this fierce overdetermination of reality by ideology did not only affect the present. It also extended into the past. The communist propaganda apparatus implemented systematic and obvious measures to modify, erase, and construct history and public memory in ways which would legitimize the present. They used technology, academic research, and commemorative public rituals to achieve this. The new, official narratives of history were promoted on every channel of media and art. These obvious and often outrageous manipulations of public memory found a counterpart in a cinema that evoked the past in allegorical and nostalgic ways. In Chapter 2, I address the question of nostalgia and the re-imagining of the past through comedy, and argue that the films purposefully favor subjective memory over historical recollection. Through the analysis of particular films, I show that comedy generates a "reflective nostalgia" (Svetlana Boym) that not only offers alternative memories but also comments on the very processes of remembering. In their nostalgic restructuring of the past, the films ultimately become

partisan acts of debasement enveloped in laughter. They embrace and celebrate the subjective nature of memory, and thus undermine the state monopoly over it.

Bakhtin talks about the grotesque as primarily a material and bodily image that overflows and subverts anything high, spiritual, or abstract by transforming it into a matter of the flesh (20). This, more narrow, definition of the term will be applied in the second part of the dissertation. As I have pointed out above, the communist state made rigorous efforts to regulate and organize individual bodies into a socialist collective. But the new socialist subject proved to be unattainable and remained a desire because the communist state's biopolitics for the most part failed. Although the regime imposed all embracing and abrasive measures of control, people perceived their bodily involvement as superficial and compulsory. Chapters 3 and 4 examine two different ways in which, through the employment of the grotesque, the film comedies communicate that the communist state's biopower was ultimately ineffective.

In Chapter 3, I analyze the figure of the grotesque hero in Eastern European cinema. As an embodiment of Bakhtin's popular carnival culture, the grotesque hero's utterly matarial(istic), unfinished, and unbound nature links him to the collective. The origins of the grotesque hero I trace back to the early twentieth century when a literary figure called Švejk became hugely popular and initiated a shift in the heroic paradigms. Since then, we can account for numerous reincarnations and alter-egos of Švejk in literature and cinema. His endurance is surprisingly strong in the cultural imaginary. The grotesque hero's behavior favors physical pleasure, practicality, and endurance over honesty, bravery, and high principles. His radical heroism celebrates survival instead of sacrifice and thus challenges the traditional norms of morality. The utter materiality and

corporal politics which characterize this alternative heroic model mock and oppose the sacred, official communist ideology in its disregard for everyday, material aspects of existence.

Chapter 4 scrutinizes the perplexingly strong presence of sexuality in the films. Bizarre masks and cross-dressing (mostly male to female) were common and widespread elements of the carnival (see Natalie Zemon Davis 1975), part and parcel of the grotesque representations in medieval culture. My analysis reveals the ways in which the comedies relied on the mask of the sexualized female body to invert communist hierarchy. The pronounced staging of carnivalized female bodies, like in medieval times, will be interpreted as a mixed blessing. On the one hand the symbolic cross-dressing served to disguise political revolt and resistance. On the other hand, the grotesque image of woman became a fetish object through which specifically *masculine* subjects inscribed their desire for political liberation in relatively safe ways.

In Marxist terms, the central argument of the dissertation can be formulated as follows: Grotesque comedy in Eastern European cinema was a "socially symbolic act" (Fredric Jameson) that threw light onto the workings of communist hegemony itself. During the communist era the films performed a similar function to Bakhtin's carnival—they made it possible

> to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offer[ed] a chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists and to enter a completely new order of things. (Bakhtin 34)

The grotesque was a cherished artistic expression and a unique cultural perspective because it unmasked the incongruities and paradoxes of communist life otherwise impossible to express. The absolute non-seriousness that characterized grotesque realism became a successful and relatively safe way to talk about the absurdities and the failures of the communist system. In its carnivalesque representations, Eastern European cinema performed an important counter-cultural function that commented on the very ontology of state socialism: the irreconcilable contradiction between communist ideology and material reality that would ultimately lead to the system's demise as well as the state's aggressive attempts and failure to interpellate its subjects.

To say that grotesque realism in Eastern European cinema, at least on an imaginary level, allowed for a "revelatory rather than complacent relation to ideology" (Klinger 79) is not the same as to read communist history transparently through its cinema. But while I recognize that "the procedures of profanation, degradation, misalliance, and familiarization [were] […] unable to affect permanently the official culture" (Lachman 71), I make the case that the comedies, by replicating reality in exaggerated and laughable ways, ultimately contributed to a much needed "alternative public sphere" (Miriam Hansen) where the taboos of communist life could be tackled in relatively safe ways. The grotesque reordering of the world was an important instance of counter-cultural resistance that perpetuated an absolute non-serious vision of the world against the overpowering official world of communism. The medium of cinema performed a symbolic act similar to the young girl in Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale who calls out that "The Emperor wears no clothes!"

Chapter 1

The Absurd Representation of Communism in Eastern European Cinema

"*A clear diagnosis about the absurd senselessness of reality is*
by itself an undisputedly positive reactant. Even if it does not cure,
it gives rise to an irresistible urge to be cured."
(Miroslav Krleža quoted in Pavle Levi)

"*A helyzet volt tehát abszurd, amiben írni kezdtem,*
amit megírtam, az maga a nyers, vad neorealizmus..."
[*The situation was absurd that I wrote in, what I wrote*
was naked, brutal Neorealism] (Tibor Zalán about his drama, *Sakk-Bástya*)

Mikhail Bakhtin states that the nucleus of carnival is far from being purely artistic. The carnival stands on the borderline between art and life; in fact "it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play" (7) which he calls "the grotesque." Bakhtin's dialectical understanding of carnival culture makes the grotesque, paradoxically, a *mimetic* mode of representation. But where exactly do we find the connection and the border between life and art? How does the grotesque reshape the patterns of reality in recognizable ways? If, as I argue, grotesque comedy in Eastern European cinema is a cultural response to the contradictions in the communist *mode d'être,* what mimetic elements can we identify in it?

Communist life was structured around a number of irresolvable contradictions. Politically and geographically rearranged several times in the first part of the century, Eastern Europe went through arbitrary and radical shifts in power from imperialism to fascism, to communism, and finally to capitalist democracy. After World War II, the region was handed over to the Soviet "sphere of influence"—best described as "triumphant but battle-scarred, impoverished and vindictive" (Bideleux 520). The Soviet

communist ideology that was imposed on the war-scarred and newly reshuffled Eastern Europe often manifested itself through "ideological masquerade and police terror" (Mărculescu 384). In order for the communist powers to sustain and perpetuate themselves, they had to resort to all-encompassing ideologies and repressive institutions to enforce the new regimes. This led to an irreversible separation of externally imposed ideological practices from the underlying historical conditions.

In Marxist terms we can talk about a separation between *base* and *superstructure*, between the official ideology and lived reality in the communist state. The artificial imposition of communist ideology on the existing social, political, and economic structures contributed to language being perceived as more and more in contradiction with reality. This ultimately led to a schizophrenic existence that Slavoj Žižek called "doublethink" in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*[4] and Martin Esslin referred to as "doubletalk" (408) describing a mental state where one is capable of holding two contradictory beliefs simultaneously and accepting them both as valid. In the vast distance between communist ideals and their applications, between planned economy and actual material production, between mass media representations of social consensus and ceaseless political trials, Corina Mărculescu observes, the "individual was compelled to behave as though he believed all the mystifications of the official ideology, while he knew perfectly well that no one took them seriously" (391). Being "out of harmony" was therefore a defining part of the "structures of feeling" (Raymond Williams) under communism. To successfully maintain this duplicity in the individual's consciousness, language "had to embrace and permeate everything" (Mărculescu 385). It had to force

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[4] Inspired by George Orwell's novel, *1984*.

itself onto the social and economic structures creating a sense of reality completely detached from bodily experience.

Language in Eastern Europe played an important role in upholding the communist regimes because it provided a contradictory and non-binding relationship with the world it was supposed to describe. Václav Havel, writing about the role of ideology in inverting communist reality further clarifies this point in his essay, "The Power of the Powerless":

> [Ideology] falsifies the past. It falsifies the present, and it falsifies the future. It falsifies statistics. It pretends to respect human rights…Thus the complete degradation of the individual is presented as his ultimate liberation; depriving people of information is called making it available; the arbitrary abuse of power is called observing the legal code; farcical elections become the highest form of democracy; banning independent thought becomes the most scientific of world views. [quoted in Mărculescu 385]

What Havel expresses remarkably well here is not only that the communist "language-carnival" has overthrown all logical connections between signifier and signified, but also that such twisted, ideologically determined signification took priority over the actually existing material conditions. This prescriptive function of language was most intense during communism where signification was "totally planned and administered" by the political authorities turning "cowardice, infamy, [and] opportunism" into virtues (Mărculescu 387).

The strong presence of grotesque realism in Eastern European cinema during communism I interpret as a cultural response to the paradoxes and uncertainties characterizing the artificially imposed ideological, political, and economic structures of communism. Incoherence and irrationality in the absurd are not simply formalistic elements; they are fictional reflections of important "structures of feeling" dominating

Eastern European communist reality. The world depicted by the films discloses a breach between image and language, between action and description, and between narrative expectations and delivery undermining any attempt at coherence and rational cohesion.

To answer my initial question about what elements in grotesque realism can we identify as *mimetic*, as reflecting the very nature of communist existence I claim that the primary *realist* element in the grotesque is to be found in its strong links with the *absurd*. Bakhtin recognizes in *Rabelais and His World* that medieval grotesque realism eventually returned in twentieth century culture. Although he does not refer to it as "absurd," the two branches of grotesque that he identifies—existential (exemplified by Alfred Jarry) and realist (exemplified by Bertolt Brecht) (46)—in fact both belong to the aesthetic movement called "modern absurd." The absurd that Bakhtin himself identifies as the twentieth century form of grotesque, adds the realist and modern element to the medieval grotesque. It is a form of mimesis because it aesthetically reproduces the contradictions and incongruities at the core of the communist ideological system.

György Lukács's anti-modernist predicament is especially interesting if one is to make the case that, in Rodney Livingstone's words, the grotesque in the absurd finds "a new historical development for realism" (21). Lukács's increasing commitment to romantic anti-capitalism and classical aesthetics, as well as his hatred of "bourgeois decadence," stop him from seeing modernist aesthetics as a dialectical enterprise. Most theorists of absurd art follow Lukács's interpretation and define it in modernist terms as a symptom of some existential crisis, a Faustian, apocalyptic feeling that has accompanied the modern experience. Although Martin Esslin (2001) and Nicolae Balotă (1979) both recognize the social and historical factors at the foundation of the absurd, they argue that

ultimately it is the manifestation of "the sense of senselessness in the human condition and the inadequacy of rational approach" (Esslin 24).

Balotă criticizes Esslin for attaching the absurd to ahistorical, universal human conditions, but he himself describes it as a quintessentially modernist experience, an outcome of a century long "irrationalist movement" as well as of capitalist alienation and objectification (Balotă 66). Esslin and Balotă occupy critically very different positions from Lukács. Yet, ultimately the three agree that the absurd is *not* a realistic mode of representation, but rather that the relationship between the absurd and reality is indirect and involuntary. They also agree that its universal concern rooted in existential desperation and alienation cannot be "subordinated to mimesis-aesthetics" (Balotă 219) because the world the absurd describes does not exist naturally.

The absurd certainly does not provide a comforting feeling of organic unity with the world for which Lukács is so nostalgic. Neither does it offer the gay merriment that Bakhtin claims to stand at the core of the carnivalesque world. Hence indeed, it could be dismissed as nonrealistic, preoccupied only with "the disintegration of the world of man—and consequently the disintegration of personality" (Lukács 39), as pessimistic and devoid of grotesque realism's liberating force. However, if precisely such disintegration, reversal, degradation, and totalizing language make up much of Eastern European reality during the twentieth century, would it not follow that artistic representations of fragmentation, nonsense, and incongruence are *realist* by nature? What happens to mediation and mimesis if reality itself is perceived as twisted, illogical, and perverse?

I see two elements in Esslin and Balotă's analysis that can help us measure the realist nature of the new, twentieth century Eastern European grotesque comedy. Firstly,

they claim that the absurd reveals a situation "out of harmony" with an imagined normality. Absurd art proposes that the way things *are* and how they *should be* is completely incongruous and that the linguistic sign has been disconnected from its referent. The absurd mockingly reproduces the communist state's aggressive use of discourse and the separation between the signifier and its referent. It builds into the grotesque an incongruity that mimetically reconstructs the void between material conditions and discursive reality—or, in Marxist terms, between the base and the superstructure.

This state of incongruence was definitive of the communist ontology because it generated and maintained a seemingly homogeneous albeit totally twisted and fictitious reality. The absurd in the film comedies unveils language's quintessential role in producing and maintaining the illusion of a coherent, official reality. The incongruence in the films transforms into a digestible and laughable matter what we, the viewers could not comprehend logically in our everyday lives under communism—namely, that the "'objective reality' [...] served to create this pseudo-reality which is the substance of the ideological system" (Tismăneanu 110). Hence, the absurd does not simply *explicate*, but rather attempts to *duplicate* the very essence of Eastern European communism. In its subject matter and textual mechanisms it repeats the discrepancy between official discourse and material reality that stood at the core of the communist experience, and as such it makes the grotesque vision of the world fundamentally mimetic.

Secondly, in Balotă and Esslin's view, nonsense, clichés, and broken verbal communication in absurd literature unveil a perceived "deflation of language" (Esslin 337). The illogical, nonsense, and ungrammatical verbal structures are all symptoms of

an overall distrust towards the "fossilized debris of dead language" (Esslin 348), a result of modern existence where discourse had lost its power to refer to the world. Clichés are essential in the aesthetic of the absurd because they are distilled examples of how language is heavily implicated in the production of ideological order. Linguistic incongruity, fragmentation, irrationality, and the mocking use of clichés—all elements of the absurd—reproduce and depict how official language under communism generated an ideological and discursive real (Lacan called it "the Symbolic") that overdetermined material reality.

I argue that the above-described two essential characteristics of the absurd (incongruity and the primacy of discourse) outline a new, twentieth century reincarnation of the grotesque realist aesthetics. The absurd—when it discloses a rupture between how things are and how they should be and when it underlines the power of language to cover the incongruence—demystifies the very nature of Eastern European existence under communism. To put it in simple terms, when the films build their comic world on absurd incongruity and linguistic nonsense in fact they *emulate* the communist official culture as it constructed itself through nonsense, pretence, masquerade, and contradictions. The absurd in grotesque cinema builds on visual incongruence and narrative fragmentation to generate a bizarre, carnivalesque fictional world resembling *and* mocking the communist existence. The fictional restructuring of the world through the absurd adds a modern quality to Bakhtin's folkloric comedy bringing it up to date in the twentieth century visual culture. It also creates a darker, less festive atmosphere that better corresponds with the experiences of communist reality as incongruous and incomprehensible in logical terms.

The Firemen's Ball

The Firemen's Ball (*Hoří, má panenko*, 1967) was Miloš Forman's last film made in Czechoslovakia before he was forced to immigrate to France after threats of persecution when the film was released. Originally on a mission with screenwriters Ivan Passer and Jaroslav Papoušek to film a sequel for *Loves of a Blonde* (*Lásky jedné plavovlásky*, 1965)[5], which was received to great domestic and international acclaim, the filmmakers had trouble finding inspiration for their new movie. By accident, they ventured into a firemen's ball in a remote village that was terribly mismanaged and its ridiculous chaos inspired the three to start working on *The Firemen's Ball*. After the film was completed (in December 1967), it played in Czechoslovakia until the violent occupation of the country by the Soviet army during the Prague Spring, at which moment the movie was banned "forever" (Schubert 40).

Although Forman repeatedly denied a political dimension to the movie, it has been interpreted as a symbolic representation of the chaos and failure of the communist system in 1960s Czechoslovakia. The story revolves around the grand plan of a fire brigade to celebrate the eighty-sixth birthday of their retired commander who is suffering from cancer. Driven partly by their guilt of not celebrating his eighty-fifth birthday—when he was still healthy—the firemen decide to honor the old chief with a special gift, an axe that will be handed to him by the beauty queen elected from the crowd on the spot. However, the brigade's good intensions turn into a burlesque-like disaster: the raffle items disappear, the beauty contestants run away causing pandemonium, and everyone forgets about the honorary guest. Finally, a fire alarm goes off, but by the time the fire

[5] This film will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

fighters get to the scene, the wooden house burns to the ground. The community decides to "generously" give up their raffle tickets for the benefit of the fire victim; however, none of the objects to be raffled remained on the table. When the ball ends, the fire brigade realizes that they forgot about their honorary guest, the old commander. For lack of a better option, they decide to hand him the gift themselves in the empty ballroom. The film ends as the old fireman proudly opens the box only to find it empty. Like everything else, the axe was also stolen. The mixture of the grotesque and the absurd that characterizes the world of *The Firemen's Ball* pokes fun at the artificially orchestrated "fun time," the widespread corruption, and random bureaucratic decisions that defined communism, while in a truly carnivalesque manner we see the crowd as it cheers and rejoices in the chaos.

Even before the credits, *The Firemen's Ball* shows signs of self-mockery. An image hanging from the ceiling depicts a group of firemen aiming at a burning house. The painting itself catches fire by accident and the firemen fail to put out the flames because their equipment is broken. The incongruity between the imaginary order and reality is made obvious here visually: the real firemen in the hall fail to carry out the very job that their imaginary colleagues in the painting so proudly and successfully achieve. This burning image foreshadows the disintegration and chaos that will emerge from the festival. Between the burning picture at the beginning of the film and the burning house in the end we stand witness to the firemen's officially orchestrated celebration as it gradually spins out of control. The firemen fail to control the ball and, just like the picture on the wall, the official reality they try to maintain finally perishes.

The absurd element in the film discloses the contradictions and irrationalities of the celebration. The film sets up its world as morbidly purposeless and farcical: the firemen and the fire happily coexist and cancer is a cause for celebration. According to the logic of the film, the axe that is supposed to signify respect and honor for the decades-long dedication of the retired fireman turns into a congratulatory gesture for his incurable illness. The occasion for merriment is not an occasion at all and the celebratory discourses are in stark opposition to the macabre reality of cancer and decay. The law (that forbids doctors to tell the truth to their patients) sanctions this duplicity and obscures reality in order to legitimize the ball. The ruling law is indeed "the law of freedom" characterizing the carnival, but in this case freedom signifies the lack of any order in the ludicrous official celebration. The separation between reality (the old man's cancer) and discourse (the firemen's arguments for celebration), filtered through the absurd, brings forth language's incongruous relationship to the world emphasizing the duplicity in communist signification.

Futility and randomness convert the ball-organizers' sense of self-importance into a farce. The irrationality of the bureaucratic procedures in light of the gravity with which they are carried out mocks the ball as a senseless self-celebration. The best example of the absurd incongruity between the firemen's idea of a ball and its materialization in reality is the beauty contest. Inspired by a newspaper clipping that shows a line of beautiful young women competing for the title of beauty queen, the firemen decide to reproduce the contest in the ballroom and to match the newspaper images with their reality. This, however, proves to be futile and turns into a farce. Even though the selection committee is fully dedicated to its mission (to pick the best candidates for the

contest), the list constantly and haphazardly changes depending on personal favoritism, corruption, and drunkenness. As the moment of the contest approaches and the committee finalizes its arrangements, they realize that neither in number nor in quality can they match the newspaper clippings. The girls chosen to compete are only average looking, and the firemen's obvious disappointment appears clearly in a close-up on the chief officer's face. The mismatch between appearances and material reality becomes irreversible in this moment of failure.

The void between what the beauty contest should be and what it turns out to be grows wide, and finally the show falls apart when the women, instead of entering the stage, run away and lock themselves in the restroom. In the ensuing total chaos, random women from the crowd are dragged onto the stage. Finally, in a truly carnivalesque inversion, the mob crowns an old lady as the beauty queen, who happily accepts and enthusiastically waves to her "admirers." Characteristically, the subversive carnival is also the most important moment of entertainment and pleasure for the crowd. The ball as an official ritual collapses but the breakdown opens space for a truly transgressive carnival of celebration.

The raffle, a central component of the festivity, carries an allegorical weight in the movie. When Josef (Josef Kolb), the fireman who is responsible for organizing the raffle, discovers the disappearance of the items, he first accuses his colleagues of theft and later goes into a desperate reasoning to defend himself and to justify the loss. His crazy chain of reasoning employs a frantic logic to solve the mystery for a moment—until a colleague points out that either way there is nothing left on the table. Reality paralyzes Josef; he is lost in his own perverted discursive logic trying to figure out what was on the table and

what exactly disappeared, and how and where all the items vanished. His insistence on explaining the inexplicable shows an important attachment to appearances and to language as the façades that hold together the film's disintegrating world.

The raffle also turns into a comic farce, just the opposite of what it is intended to be. Community raffles, hypothetically, have two important characteristics: they guarantee that every contributor wins (there is no losing ticket) and they help create a sense of collectivity since everybody has to contribute something. In *The Firemen's Ball* however, neither of these aspects are present—in fact quite the opposite happens. Intended to be a fun activity, the raffle turns out to be a disaster and a parody of itself. Even before the ball begins, the items start to disappear from the table. As the events progress, the vanishing of the objects becomes unstoppable, leaving only the numbers and the empty plates on the table. The ubiquitous stealing undermines the sense of collectivity instead of generating it. The selfish and shortsighted behavior of the participants, who steal what they themselves have brought goes against any common sense.

The discrepancy is not only between plan and execution, idea and materialization, but also between language and its referent. When the crowd, as a token of their sympathy, offers the fire victim a tray with the raffle tickets, he rejects it saying they are "useless pieces of paper." The solidarity of the audience is rendered meaningless and absurd in this rebuttal because the primary object that would prove sympathy is gone. Since the raffle table is completely empty, the tickets cease to have meaning. They are no longer tied to any existing materiality or symbolic power. The raffle incident exposes a crack in the signification process: the signifier (raffle tickets) stands by itself since the signified (the objects they refer to) is absent—it was "stolen." Signification becomes a problem in

other ways, too when one fireman cannot find the right word to describe the audience's feelings about the tragedy. The crowd shouts out words such as "generosity" and "kindness" to help him out, but none seems to satisfy the speaker's mental concept. Finally, "solidarity" comes the closest, but the speaker's prolonged stumbling and hesitation deprives the word of any rhetorical power.

Language is shown to be ineffective and disconnected from reality at the end of the film as well, when the firefighters rush into the empty ballroom where the old commander is still waiting for his moment of honor. There is no audience to validate their ritual of gratitude, and the old commander's acceptance speech, the only reasonable expression in the entire film and the last hope for coherence, is undermined in an ironic contrast with the empty gift box. The old commander's thankful words stand out in the general collapse of meaningful signification. His short and coherent speech emphasizes even more what happens in the rest of the film, namely that language fails to cover for the decomposing reality.

When the firefighters decide to switch off the lights in the ballroom in order to give an opportunity to the crowd to replace the raffle objects without any repercussions, the first lights-out results in total chaos and even more items disappear. When the lights go out and come back for the second time, Josef is caught as the only one trying to put a piece of headcheese back on the table (as it turns out, his wife stole it earlier). Josef's gesture of honesty is answered with a furious reaction form his wife ("Everyone is stealing here and you are only watching, you old honest fool") as well as from his comrades who accuse him of humiliating the whole fire brigade. While the firemen differ

on how to handle the embarrassing situation, they all agree that Josef should not have returned the headcheese.

The conversation about Josef's "shameful act" reveals a perverse logic that understands honesty as foolish and stealing as the norm. The firefighters blame and condemn Josef for refusing to play along with the tacit rules of universal corruption. His honesty and desperation is understood as foolishness; it is declared to be a handicap in a world where stealing is routine. His mental breakdown after the incident is seen as weakness, a sign of his inability to understand the "normal" order of things. The only honest man thus becomes the main idiot in the carnivalesque, upside down world, where official rituals (balls, birthday celebrations, raffle, beauty contest, etc.) are intertwined with unreserved shamming.

The movie discloses a wide disconnection between language and the material conditions it is supposed to describe. Language is the primary tool to control and to validate the ball's utterly incomprehensible world. We repeatedly hear convoluted explanations and justifications for the firemen's irrational actions. The fire brigade takes several discursive measures to create an image of the ball as purposeful and orderly. The men are completely consumed by the attempt to organize the celebration and to keep the events under control. Through linguistic interpellation they try to manage the official order that is falling apart. For instance, they give the participants in the beauty contest strict, military-like instructions on how to behave on stage. But while the firemen struggle to keep things under control by ordering, begging, and quarrelling with each other and the participants, the contest slowly turns into a "bad joke," a fading fantasy. The beauty contest, the raffle, and the ball itself gradually move to an exclusively

linguistic level giving way to a grotesque carnival and to the emergence of the chaotic reality disconnected from the linguistic sphere. Gradually, as the patchwork of the ball's discursively created world crumbles down, utter chaos, disobedience, debasement, and uncontrollable fire take over. Discourse fails to hold together the decaying world that slowly turns into a Rebelaisian carnival.

The last shot slowly pans across the snowy landscape disclosing the ruins of the burned house and its devastated owner among the ashes. The grim ending is a conscious statement about the absurd discrepancy between truth, reality (the burnt house) and jolly pretense—the ball. *The Firemen's Ball* visually reconstructs the absurd discrepancy between how things are and how they are supposed to be in the communist Czechoslovakia of the 1960s. Neither Party discourse nor official language could keep the communist reality under control for a sustained period of time. The critical role of *The Firemen's Ball* lies in tearing apart the veil of a seemingly cheerful, celebratory official communist culture and allowing a glimpse at the fundamentally absurd material real behind it. The growing Marxist-reformist movement in Czechoslovakia brought to surface the same absurd incongruities culminating in the 1968 revolution and its bloody military oppression.

A Trip Down the River

Marek Piwowski's cult classic, *A Trip Down the River* (*Rejs*, 1970) just like Miloš Forman's film, divulges the absurdity of communism that lies in the ideological overdetermination of reality. *A Trip Down the River* is a true masterpiece in the Eastern European absurd art tradition, well loved and often quoted by Polish audiences. Piwowski

represented a new generation of young filmmakers who emerged during the institutional reorganization of the Polish film industry. The establishment of a new studio (headed by Kazmier Kutz) provided space for younger directors to experiment with new thematic and stylistic directions that resulted in a "new black series" (Liehm 377) in Polish cinema. "Black cinema" dealt with the contemporary, post-revolutionary reality in a somber and bleak tone. Piwowski was one of the first to call attention to himself in this "black wave" combining the political tone of Polish cinema from the 1950s with the aesthetic innovations of the 1960s.

A Trip Down the River is an example of cinéma verité in that it mostly used nonprofessional actors and was filmed in a semi-documentary style to record an aimless, leisurely weekend boat-trip that turned into a hilarious critique of communist societies. The main hero (Stanisław Tym) is a stowaway. He and his friend manage to sneak aboard a boat just as it is about to go on a vacation trip down the Vistula River. The captain immediately appoints the stowaway as the cultural coordinator for the Party. Adapting quickly to his new role, the KO (cultural organizer) calls for a general assembly where, at his suggestion, the passengers "collectively" agree to organize a celebration for the captain's birthday. Ridiculous and absurd bureaucratic procedures take over the course of events: the passengers are forced to participate in humiliating games, highly choreographed dances, and singing rehearsals under the strict supervision of the Cruise Council. Life on the boat slowly transforms into a grotesque parody of communist authoritarianism. The Council investigates allegations of treason; it welcomes spying and conducts expulsions infused with lavish bureaucratic procedures and political propaganda. In the meantime, the passengers are forced to participate in pointless rituals,

physical exercise, and ridiculous performances. The film ends abruptly with a climactic carnival where the passengers wear costumes and drink and dance aimlessly on the deck of the boat.

A Trip Down the River discloses the absurd discrepancy between ideologically induced and actual reality, but it does so in highly abstract, self-conscious, and aesthetically innovative ways. The opening scene shows an empty beach as we hear a loudspeaker systematically and mechanically repeating the rules in case of drowning. Since nobody is swimming in the water, the opposition between sound and image immediately generates a sense of absurd. In addition, the main protagonists don't have tickets to the beach, so they enter by playing several tricks on the dumb guards and get on the cruising boat in the last minute before it departs. The ridiculousness only intensifies with a nonsensical "job interview" between the captain and the stowaway including questions like "Foreign languages?" to which the answer is "What do you mean? How foreign?"

The stowaway's behavior during the general assembly reveals another discrepancy between political position and real identity. First the KO tries to run away, but when he is chased back by the captain, he decides to introduce himself by sharing only the year and place of his birth (and not his name). Although he proves to be utterly incompetent in this official role, his initial lack of confidence gradually disappears and gives way to a self-assured and hostile arrogance due to his esteemed political position. The film keeps the incongruity between who the KO appears to be (an important official) and who he is (a stowaway) obvious even as he tries to hide it behind authoritative orders.

The general assembly is the first step towards the gradually emerging aberrant social structures on the boat. The importance of the meeting is undermined by a lack of any meaningful decisions due to the participants' hesitant, irrational, and senseless behavior. For instance, after the KO's brief, useless self-introduction one passenger remarks: "At every meeting somebody has to speak up first." Such self-referential remarks continue throughout the film distancing the viewer from the text. The element of self-referentiality plays an important role in the absurdist aesthetic as it allows for a self-aware position that makes critical interpretation more effective. Language fails to be a tool of communication; instead, it is presented as purely self-referential. Most statements are conveyed in a similar vacuum of referentiality and clichés dominate the artificially induced system on the boat. Language's total disconnection from material reality makes it hard for the speakers to remember their own words. Its repeated dislocation within the film narrative pushes language to "stand out."

There are numerous instances where meaningful interaction is impossible and discursive authority breaks down. For instance, one passenger casually shares his view that "truth and beauty are absolute values and are in a dialectic relationship" and that consequently "ugly truths as well as beautiful falsehoods exist." These statements refer to nothing identifiable in the film narrative. Yet, nonsense starts to makes sense if interpreted within the framework of communist reality. The highly abstract, philosophical clichés repeated in parrot-like, discursive gestures refer to a paradox in communism that enabled "beautiful falsehoods" (ideology) and "ugly truths" (actual reality) to coexist. Such assertions of philosophical dialectics have a mimetic orientation towards the real world outside the film.

The film also retains an absurd pathos through its clichéd discursive mannerisms. Even in the most mundane situations, the passengers insist on deploying poetic language. The poet and the philosopher are the best examples of how the official discourse on the boat renders the world solely within the linguistic sphere. For instance, a poet tries to talk during the general assembly but nobody (including the viewers) can hear him. He is asked to move to the front, but his speech is a confused blab about nature, about writing poetry, and about how he moves listeners to tears. The poet's speech is a list of statements about his *ars poetica*: he talks about "sadness and nostalgia" in his poetry, about his wish to "know people better," to describe the "beauty of raw, untamed nature", and the "imprints of anterior lives." Such clichés as well as others like "nervous ecstasy," "I want to understand people's lives," and "cataclysmic disaster" make up the senseless diatribe. This nonsense is further doubled by the KO's repetition who "translates" for those too far to hear.

Like the poet, the philosopher's existence depends exclusively on linguistic agency. He interprets every event through abstract and complex conceptual notions. On one occasion, he repeatedly argues that it is crucial to include both physical and intellectual exercises in the performance because dialectical materialism dictates it. He then follows up with a highly abstract argument about why he himself should *not* take part in the physical exercises. But the KO's reaction is to decide the problem through a "butt-smacking" game. Using his discursive logic, the philosopher first tries to claim his turn in the game, but the KO, with a simple nod, denies his right to smack back and goes on smacking the philosopher alone. Having no other option and suffering from increasing pain, the philosopher finally gives up and joins the gymnastic group.

The scene is suggestive because it shows not only the pathetically helpless situation of the philosopher when facing political authority, but also that he is a captive of his own linguistic maneuvers. The fact that he ends up in the gymnastic group indicates that his discursive power is limited by his position in the social hierarchies. The KO's status overrides any rational argument. A fair chance at discursive control is just an illusion behind which arbitrary powers assert themselves and dominate the social relations on the boat. The self-appointed Cruise Council headed by the KO insists on following discursive protocols because those generate and underpin the desired hierarchy and social order. Every event is a step forward in establishing a twisted farcical society as the official order. Linguistic articulations make this possible because they form a "language-totality" that is self-contained and immune to criticism. The commemorative project ultimately mirrors communist hegemony's self-sustaining mechanism—the linguistic underpinning of the totalitarian order—but also its inefficiency, ridiculousness and triviality.

The burlesque is also part of the Eastern European grotesque aesthetic. Many comedies rely on physical comedy to convey the grotesque nature of their world. In the particular case of A *Trip Down the River*, we see two men as they excitedly engage in mimicking the act of fishing. When one shows the size of his palm the other responds by showing the size of his forearm. As they look to the side, further away on the deck a sailor is standing showing them the size of both his arms stretched out. Their grimacing faces show annoyance at the success of the sailor who has apparently caught such a big fish. But a moment later, a passenger throws a tomato out the window that splashes on a piece of glass carried by the sailor. Neither the two men nor the audience saw the glass in

the sailor's hands earlier. The series of slapstick-like sketches continue when another sailor and a fishing passenger exchange rods by accident triggering complete chaos on the boat. The discrepancy between spectatorial expectation and narrative delivery in these scenes creates a comic tension evoking the sense of absurd. Much of the film's absurd humor derives from the constantly emerging gaps between the viewers' expectations based on the visual information available (the sailor stretching his arm to signal the size of fish) and the narrative reality (the sailor holding a large piece of glass).

The scenes described above connect the burlesque to the grotesque and to the absurd, also noted by Martin Esslin in his book, *The Theater of the Absurd*. Esslin claims that, the "fast-and-furious timing of the grotesque comedy of the silent cinema" (Esslin 335) resembles by nature the aesthetics and politics of the absurd. The films often evoke Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton's burlesque comedy that emphasized the discrepancy between the body and material reality and displayed the world in "constant and wholly purposeless movement" (Esslin 335). Esslin claims that silent film comedy had "decisive influences" (Esslin 335) on the theater of the absurd primarily in its abandonment of causality and rationality and in embracing the nonsense, the "*non-savoir*" (Georges Bataille) and the mechanical. Burlesque, in his account, "has a dreamlike strangeness of a world seen from outside with the uncomprehending eyes of one cut off from reality. It has the quality of nightmare and displays a world in constant and wholly purposeless, movement" (Esslin 335). In other words, the source of laughter in burlesque comedy is the same as in the absurd in that both derive from a comic tension between reason and unreason and both rely on incongruity between perception and reality, narrative coherence and its complete breakdown. The mechanization of the subject generates an

opposition between the body and the outside world. This "falling of the body" due to irresistible outside forces (e.g. gravity) in many films reflects on the symbolic mechanization of the socialist bodies by communist ideology. Mechanization and automatism treated through burlesque laughter is an important trope in Eastern European grotesque as it addresses the alienating nature of communism.

The visual information often deceives the characters and privileges the viewer. Engineer Mamon, for instance, while sitting on the deck next to his wife, looks through a pair of binoculars and excitedly comments on the gorgeous scenery on the shore—the beautiful woods, fields, the amazing haystacks, tractors and cottage. But in reality, as the image reveals to the viewer, he is staring at young women in bathing suits on a ship sailing nearby. The superlatives used by Mamon refer simultaneously to the nonexistent rustic scenery and the visually very much present half-naked women. His admiring words play on language's immanent ambiguity as they are both connected to and disconnected from the image. His description can refer to two entirely different things at the same time. The separation between signifier and signified (word and image) liberates language from the chain of referentiality leaving it in an absurd position of absolute relativity. This can be described as the carnivalization of language, where the logical primacy of material reality over the discursive one is turned upside down. The absurd carnivalizes language by presenting it as free of logic, as nonsense, and as irreducibly complex with contradictory meanings. But it is important to note that the viewers are made aware of this discursive masquerade because, although the duplicity of Mamon's words is hidden from his wife, it is disclosed to us through the privileged gaze of the camera/binocular.

The absurd mimetically reproduces communist hegemony in its schizophrenic split between ideology and reality, between official discourse and the actual experience, as well as between politicized language and referent. George Orwell in his novel, *1984* refers to the simultaneous awareness *and* purposeful ignorance of ideological discrepancies as “doublethink” necessary in order to sustain the image of a utopian reality. Doublethink, an essential component of communist *mode de vie* means a self-imposed blindness that overlooks reality in order to sustain ideological mystifications. This is brilliantly exemplified in the scene where one passenger plays a beautiful but sad song on his guitar. The KO surprisingly explains the song in positive terms, declaring it to be not pessimistic but *ironic*. Since in the socialist state everyone is naturally full of desire and optimism, according to the KO, a pessimistic song can only be interpreted as mocking. The KO’s obvious lack of understanding will become the ultimate source of truth. This suggests that the truth-value of any statement in the film derives not from its logic but from the position of its source in the hegemonic order. The KO’s imposed discursive authority turns the sad song into its own opposite—an ironical, humorous melody. Such illogical decisions can take effect because the committee members and the singer himself go along with the authoritative interpretation and ignore its obvious irrationality. Understanding how a talented singer’s song can be interpreted as ironic speaks to the core of the communist existence and its perverse logic that the film reproduces. The singer is delegated to the gymnasts’ group in the end because language in the hands of those in power overrides the material reality and replaces his sad song with a fictitious, discursive entity (ironic humor).

A Trip Down the River shows how language-totality determines material conditions by putting a demand on reality and forcefully adjusting it to its own descriptions. A word on the wall can lead to the prosecution of a passenger without any logical, objective evidence. Facts are manufactured and easily modified to fit the Cruise Council's preconceived expectations. The world that slowly emerges aboard the boat abides by the linguistically generated coordinates. Social relations are generated and maintained by talking about them and by verbally complying with the artificially imposed rules and regulations. But the absurd rendering of language that draws attention to its overinflation has a revelatory goal that goes beyond the film and connects to the communist reality via mimesis.

In a top down fashion, everybody is assigned a function in the social ritual of the celebration. The meticulously long debates about specific song and dance arrangements, the deliberations about the exact quality and meaning of each performance, the decisions about the right interpretation and the adequate tone for each song all underpin the importance of linguistic reification in the official rituals. Because these rituals have no organic tie to the subjects who perform them, the discursive practices have to be forceful in order to maintain the sense of reality on the boat. At the same time, the passengers' lack of enthusiasm and their apathy is shown in the slow pace with which they carry out the mad singing and gymnastic exercises. The passengers' passive behavior suggests a half-hearted compliance with the authority of the Cruise Council and exemplifies well the communist doublethink. Although far from being dedicated to it, the people do not refuse to participate in the official festival. As Slavoj Žižek observes, in communism "what mattered was not inner belief in the propositions of the ruling ideology, but following the

external rituals and practices in which this ideology acquired material existence" (2001: 90). In other words, although there was a clear sense of disjunction between one's inner perceptions and one's actions in reality, this incongruence, as exemplified by the compliant but unenthusiastic behavior of the passangers, was consciously and consistently ignored through doublethink. Actions did not correspond to real structures of belief and the discrepancies between the two became more and more obvious as communism's historical clock was ticking away, weakening the official narratives day by day.

In its absurd, self-reflexive moments the film demystifies the nature of communist ideology. In a crucial scene, the Mamon and Sidorowska families sit together on the boat's deck and engage in a slow paced, meaningless discussion about their lives. Engineer Mamon talks about his interests and shares his disapproving view of Polish cinema. He says, "I don't like to go to the movies, especially Polish films. They bore me, that's all. I go to foreign films, because they are…how do you say….an experience. But Polish films … complete boredom. [silence] The dialogues are awful, just awful. [long silence] No action whatsoever." The long silence he complains about defines Mamon's own monologue about Polish cinema. The camera is still; it focuses on three of the four characters sitting next to each other motionless while the boat is slowly moving in the water. While Mamon talks, there is no action on the screen; everyone keeps the same position, they all sit with expressionless faces. The fixed position of the camera and the actors' detached facial expressions stand in an ironic dialogue with Mamon's statements about Polish cinema where "nothing happens." His claims literally visualize in front of

our eyes—we are watching precisely the kind of Polish films that he dismissively criticizes.

Engineer Mamon then goes on to describe a particular scene from a Polish movie where the actor was lighting a cigarette. "So he lights up. Looks to the right. Then left. Straight ahead." He talks about his experience of viewing this scene in the following terms: "sitting in the theater. Just looking at the screen, I watch and I watch…until I get to the point where I want to walk out… and I do." Mamon simultaneously *tells* and *enacts* his viewing experience. He follows his own description of the Polish actor's behavior step-by-step: first lighting a cigarette, then looking left and right as he is talking, and finally leaving the frame. The camera and the acting faithfully follow Mamon's statements about Polish cinema. A Polish film thus openly references Polish films claiming them/itself to be "useless garbage" and "utter boredom"—an ironic self-characterization and an absurdist gesture that distances the viewer from the filmtext.

In the above-described scene, language materializes in front of our eyes; the visual field fully echoes the character's linguistic statements. This self-aware moment is absurd in its dramatic interruption of the film narrative. The Brechtian, defamiliarizing effect of this gesture pushes the viewer to recognize the same truth about the social constructions slowly crystallizing on the boat. Instead of looking at cinema as natural, self-explanatory, and organic, *A Trip Down the River* presents itself and its fictional world as artificially and purposefully constructed. Such metanarrative elements draw attention to the film's fabric encouraging a conscious position vis-à-vis the text. Defamiliarization is a very important part of absurd aesthetics because it has a demystifying effect. By highlighting the constructed (incongruent and linguistically

overdetermined) nature of its own world, the film facilitates a similar awareness regarding communist reality.

A Trip Down the River positions the passengers as simple vessels in the ideological project/experiment of the Council. Their bodies are devoid of agency and function simply as building blocks in a pyramid constructed based on a Dutch painter's concept of beauty and ugliness. The reification of ideology through the body posits language as a primary tool of interpellation upholding the totalitarian constructions against the relentlessly emerging reality of decay, violence, and oppression. The deck transforms into the stage on which the actors/characters play the roles given to them in a drama. They sing and dance, drink, and debate as the camera stands still, cutting from one location to the other or from one event to the next. The stage-like mise-en-scène and the still cinematography create a sense that we are watching an absurd drama and a bizarre carnival.

The ending unexpectedly cuts to a carnivalesque festival, where everybody wears exotic masks while singing and dancing to slow music. This image visually encapsulates the film's carnivalesque reconstruction of communist hegemony: human bodies are bricks in building the socialist utopia that completely depends on their willingness to wear masks and to dance obediently to the "right tune." A condensed and imaginary reflection on the official communist culture through the carnival, *A Trip Down the River* is a frank and brilliant allegory that affirms the discursively constructed and essentially fraudulent nature of the political system that based itself on duplicity and masks. Under communism, people had to act according to their ascribed role in the make-believe and had to keep up the doublethink in order to avoid retaliation. The micro-society that

materializes on the stage replicates Polish society in the 1960s governed by ideological declarations incongruent with the material conditions, ruled by random committees as well as bureaucratic rituals, and infiltrated by spying, deception, and the constant threat of political retaliation. The film underlines what was pretty obvious by the 1960s—that Eastern European communist system was based on fictitious, ideological constructions that rendered humans the passive material of a false and forced utopian endeavor.

If *The Fireman's Ball* shows how communist official culture sustained itself mainly by lies and deception and it highlights the moment when language ultimately breaks down and surrenders to a chaotic carnival with the return of repressed reality, the Polish film *A Trip Down the River* conveys just the opposite. Through its absurdist aesthetics it reveals different ways in which hegemonic ideology *generated* its own reality primarily through discursive coercion. The reality of socialism in Eastern Europe can be characterized as contingent upon the official political discourse overriding material conditions, and erasing the contradiction between public practices and private beliefs. The tacit agreement over deception (doublethink) is reproduced in such examples as the old fireman's cancer, the disappearance of the raffle items, the passengers' voluntary participation in the celebration, and their automatic acceptance of the Cruise Council's irrational decisions. The absurd in the comedies strengthens the realist aspect of the grotesque in that it mocks the coerced participation in the ideological deceptions and ceremonial rituals that the communist political system depended on.

Mihał Głowiński points out that language in the absurd reveals a "parody of official language, of the language of propaganda, a language radically schematized, full of hackneyed expressions, and in its essence ritualistic" (187). The films expose

precisely the carnivalesque aspect of language under communism: that it ceased to be a system of signs but acquired a perverse, ritualistic function that generated the official order and was oblivious to reality. The films relied on absurd humor because it was an indirect and seemingly non-threatening way to critique the failure of the communist enterprise and because it generally builds on the very incongruities (between discursive and material reality) that governed everyday life in communism.

It is important to emphasize that absurd humor not only reproduced but also *unveiled* the discursive carnival of communist totalitarianism. It disclosed the void between ideological and material reality, between what was offered as truth and what was experienced as such, and therefore it mocked language's involvement in maintaining the official culture. The duplicities at the foundation of *The Firemen's Ball* and *A Trip Down the River* ironically reflected the pretension necessary to keep the bureaucratically "over-mechanized, over-organized world" (Esslin 317) going. In the absurd, the collapsed relationship between communist ideology and reality and the incongruence between language and the world became visible. The comic distance between self and the world, role and actor, truth and deception reproduced the grotesque logic of communism that split discursively constructed reality from the existing one.

Both *A Trip Down the River* and *The Firemen's Ball* disconnect the visual sphere from the aural, the apparent from the real, nonsense from sense, plan from execution, and lies from truth. By doing so, they form a mimetic relationship with the core of the communist political system. These discrepancies are cinematic reifications of certain basic structures of feeling in the Eastern Europe. The incongruity at the heart of the absurd mirrors the incomprehensible and irreconcilable paradoxes of communism as it

attempted to make official culture compulsory and homogeneous. The widely acknowledged sense of absurdity that permeated everyday encounters with politics, institutional bureaucracy, and life in general was born from the incongruity between communist ideology and material conditions. As the films depict fictional situations characterized by the same duplicity, discursive deception, and mystification, they ultimately mirror and mock the all-encompassing discursive manipulation that contributed to establishing a (false) sense of reality in communism.

To use the metaphor of the Emperor and his new clothes again, the power of communist reality, just like that of the Emperor, lay in successfully commanding a general agreement over official fictions of authority. As long as people hailed their naked Emperor and praised his nonexistent garment, the reality of his rule was intact and could be fully exercised. Similarly, it did not matter what people thought about the Communist Party's official statements if they acted in accordance with these declarations. However, the moment when the neatly disguised official reality broke down, when it lost its "character of 'reality'" (Žižek 2001: 166) was the moment when the repressed social unconscious pressed through the thick layers of well-structured mystification. This is the moment when the Emperor's new clothes disappeared and his naked body became exposed. The film comedies' carnivalesque world gave voice to an otherwise unutterable truth: that communist ideology has overdetermined its reality and that there was something fundamentally grotesque about this.

Other Examples of Absurd in Eastern European Cinema

In order to demonstrate the prevalence of the absurd aesthetic in the long and rich tradition of communist film comedies, in what follows I will briefly discuss a few other outstanding examples. The Polish comedy, *Teddybear* (*Miš*, 1980) directed by Stanisław Bareja is one of the most beloved films in the history of Polish cinema.[6] Appearing as number two on the list of the ten most popular films of the last thirty years,[7] *Teddybear* tells an intricate story of a sport club director, Ryszard (again played by Stanisław Tym) and his adventures to get to his savings account in a London bank before his ex-wife does. The complications in the story derive from his need for a new passport to be able to enter England because his wife damaged the old one. To achieve his goal, Ryszard masterfully navigates a complicated web of deceit in order to trick both his friends and his mistress into helping him. His plan is to find a double whose identity he can use to get the new passport. In parallel, another storyline reveals the ongoing project of the sport club to build a giant teddybear as a symbol of communism's grand spirit and accomplishments.

Duplicity defines every aspect of the film. Ryszard eventually finds a double and uses him to get the passport. Since the same actor plays both characters, the viewer is deprived of easy identification and has to accept the lack of stable, inherent subjectivity and to go along with the fictional game of misidentification. Ryszard's labyrinth of

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[6] Very similar to *Teddybear* is Bareja's other film, *What Will You Do When you Catch Me?/Catch me if you can* (*Co mi zrobisz, jak mnie złapiesz*, 1978). Other examples of the strong absurdist aesthetics in Eastern European cinema are: *The Cremator* (*Spalovac mrtvol*, Juraj Herz, 1968*), One Crazy Night* (*Egy őrült éjszaka*, Ferenc Kardos, 1969), *Welcome, leutenant*! (*Isten hozta, őrnagy úr*! Zoltán Fábri, 1969), *Towertrail 74* (*Bástyasétány hetvennégy*, Gyula Gazdag, 1974), *Eva Wants to Sleep* (*Ewa chce spac*, Tadeusz Chmielewski, 1958), *Scenes from the Life of Shock Workers* (*Slike is zivota udarnika*, Bato Čengić, 1972), and *Who Is Singing Overthere?* (*Ko to tamo peva?*, Slobodan Šijan, 1981).

[7] http://www.stopklatka.pl/wydarzenia/wydarzenie.asp?wi=2729. Web. 12 December, 2009.

manipulations holds up an imaginary and twisted mirror to the absurdities characterizing every day life under communism. From the beginning, there is an obvious discrepancy between appearances and reality. In the first scene, we see the giant teddybear under construction surrounded by large cardboard houses. As we find out, this nonsense in fact does serve one purpose: the houses are supposed to please the police supervising the project. The artificially created appearance of habitation changes the highway speed regulations and allows the police to give speeding tickets to the passing cars. The opening scene establishes a void between what appears to be real (a house in a field) and what is—a cardboard facsimile.

Spaces such as the drugstore are architectural materializations of the absurd element in Ryszard's world. The shop sells a shampoo that causes the hair to fall out and also sells newspapers that only serve the purpose of wrapping black-market meat during food shortages. For example, when Ryszard's girlfriend asks for a "Polytechnic," she gets a piece of steak hidden in the paper. The eateries put chain on their spoons and screw the plates to the tables to prevent them from being stolen. However, as a result, it is impossible to actually eat the food served. These scenes depict a basic discrepancy between surface (newspaper) and inside (meat), between pretension (restaurant) and reality (eating). They reproduce the same sense of absurd that characterized the communist experience. The visualizations of incongruity mock the hopeless economic conditions that made black markets flourish and stripped restaurants of their main function, they ridicule the secrecy, pretension and scheming that was necessary in order to obtain basic goods and avoid prosecution.

The sport club's bathroom is a fascinating architectural space that symbolizes the material reality underneath the surface of deception. It is the "base" of the cleaning ladies who happily sip their coffee and eat their lunch among the broken faucets, missing tiles, and dirty sinks clogged with water. Like members of the choir in a Greek tragedy, they comment on what is happening outside the restroom. The women chatter away revealing the fakeness of Ryszard's world, his hidden motivations, and his shady past. While urinating behind the open door, the janitor often joins their conversation to complain about his boss, Ryszard. The bathroom scene is repeated several times as an ongoing commentary about the intricate lies that upheld the ruling communist regime and the ugly/dirty reality behind the veils of deception.

The camera often vacillates between Ryszard's deceiving lies and the reality that differs significantly. The film, like *A Trip Down the River,* uses the camera-eye (kino-eye) to play with narrative expectations and delivery. In one instance, as part of his crazy plotting, Ryszard shows his mistress a freshly delivered passport that he claims is hers. She of course believes that what she sees is the true object. The camera first shows her point of view as she looks at the open passport cover. However, when it cuts to Ryszard's point of view, we are facing the empty inside of the cover realizing that there is no actual passport behind the cover; it is only a ruse to deceive her and help Ryszard manipulate her further.

Completely nonsensical, carnivalesque performances permeate the film as reproductions of the official state rituals that kept control over ludicrous communist reality. Before Ryszard's double is allowed to receive the long awaited passport, first he has to listen to a patriotic poem, a national song, and finally has to watch two midgets

dancing as they slowly bring him the passport on a pillow. In another instance, we see how travelling passengers are weighed at the airport and receive fines if they have lost weight upon return from a foreign country because it means that the communist dream itself has lost some of its weight. Such irrational official procedures are supposed to underpin the system, but instead are exposed in their full absurdity through exaggeration.

Mirroring the communist reality, *Teddybear* emphasizes the role of deception in Ryszard's success. Everything he does is supported by lies and he involves everybody around him in the intricate mendacity. The climax of Ryszard's discursive machinations happens as he and his mistress are watching a basketball game on television. To impress her, Ryszard suddenly claims that he himself was a black basketball player when he was younger. The image here violates all sense of rationality. In a sudden cut to the room, where Ryszard suddenly appears possessing the body of a young black basketball player, he shows off his athletic skills. The surreal and outrageous validation Ryszard's lies through the visual unmasks the role that technology (photographic) played in promoting the communist masquerade.

Ryszard can succeed in the world governed by nonsense and pretention because he is an expert in navigating the perverse system of discursive fabrications. He uses language as a tool to sustain the ruse and to benefit from it. But the film exposes his lies and deceptions, and a grim and depressing reality emerges from under the picture perfect surface. Ryszard's web of lies is built on top of a broken reality characterized by food lines, by dysfunctional bureaucracy, by corruption, by lack of working morale, by food shortage, by thriving black markets, and by utter poverty. The façade that he creates is a carnivalesque mask that hides the dysfunctional, broken, and ugly reality.

The ongoing debate around the word “tradition” is essential to understanding the dissolved link between the signified and the signifier in the film. One person insists that “tradition” is a girl’s name because he has read in the newspaper that a certain “tradition was born.” Ryszard explains the word as meaning “extradition.” In the last scene, one man finally clarifies what “tradition” truly means. He lectures a small group surrounded by a crowd fishing and ice-skating on a winter lake. The man explains that “tradition” cannot be used as a girl’s name because it means “everyday life.” The word refers to reality that cannot be changed, real life that cannot be manipulated simply through words. He points to the fishers and skaters around as examples of what constitutes tradition; it is a day-by-day practice of the real. The winter scenery, with a similar function as the dilapidated restroom scenes earlier, is a space where material reality is made visible. In this particular space, the word “tradition” is finally matched with its logical and real meaning in an effort to restore the organic link between language and the world; in other words, it is a last attempt to reinstate referentiality.

The final scene however withdraws this hope through its visual iconography, through an allegorical gesture that discloses the particular relation between base and superstructure in the communist political system. Suddenly, the giant teddybear reappears hanging from a helicopter in the sky. The bear is cut loose and, like a meteorite, it drops and crashes into the ground destroying everything around it. The bear, an embodiment of the “triumph of communism” is shown to literally wreck people’s lives. Reality is violated and irreversibly modified by the bear and by what it represents: the ruse of communist hegemony. The closing scene is a tragicomic allegory of how communist ideology literally crashed the material reality underneath. *Teddybear,* in this absurd

visualization, reproduces the incongruous relation between base and superstructure but also exposes communist ideology as it attempts to override material reality.

Often referred to as one of the most symbolic and poetic pieces of the Czechoslovak New Wave cinema, Jan Němec's *Report on the Party and Its Guests* (*O slavnosti a hostech*, 1966) is another example of political and metaphysical together creating an absurd depiction of contemporary Czechoslovak reality. The two main characteristics of the absurd (discursive nonsense and epistemological incongruity) define both the aesthetic and the thematic field of the film. This great cinematic success was also wiped away by the Soviet invasion in 1968, as *Report on the Party and Its Guests* joined the list of Czechoslovak New Wave films "forever banned."

The opening scene reveals an impressionist idyll in the style of Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass*, a hedonistic picnic where three men and three women eat, drink, and chatter away on a sunny summer day in a forest clearing. As the group devours their food and drink spread out on the ground before them, the sense of perfect tranquility is undermined by extreme close ups, nonsensical dialogues, and broken conversations. For instance, to the question "Remember when they brought wine?" the answer is "Yes, it's a pity we didn't have swim suits." Words brush off each other in this manner throughout the film. Language, instead of creating connections between the characters, locks them tight into their own individual psychological cells. Although the absurd discontinuities in language at this point could still be seen as part of an impressionist aesthetic, in the rest of the film linguistic nonsense and clichés become significant markers of the absurdity dominating the film's narrative world.

To get ready for "the party"—an extravagant birthday celebration—the men and women wash themselves in a creek and change their clothes in the middle of the forest. The camera lingers on the women's bodies much longer than the men's; it shows them in a series of quasi-erotic close-ups as they play in the water, splash each other's bodies, and put their festive clothes on including make up and perfume. Although seemingly innocent in that it could be interpreted as part of the scenic idyll, the way the image discloses the female body has something unnatural about it. The close-ups on the women's arms, thighs, bellies, and faces construct the bodies using the codes of romantic melodrama. However, as opposed to the voyeuristic, private gaze that spies on the woman inside her boudoir, the film's mise-en-scène shows the surrounding forest—a completely public, open, and organic space—as the background. This initial incongruence between film narrative and mise-en-scène is carried throughout the film.

An important source of the dramatic tension comes from the numerous close-ups focusing on the characters' faces. Traditionally, close-ups are supposed to disclose emotional reaction and give psychological depth to the characters helping the viewer's empathy. However, in the case of *Report on the Party and Its Guests*, the extended close-ups show blank faces making it impossible to go beyond the surface of the image and rendering the characters one-dimensional. The close-ups perform the opposite function to those in melodrama because they *distance* the viewer from the film narrative instead of drawing him/her in; they interrupt the narrative instead of "bringing it home" for the viewer. In its peculiar camera movements, long takes, black and white footage, and unnatural points of view (often focusing on parts of the body) the film utilizes self-

referentiality to defamiliarize the viewer. These defamiliarizing effects are important in drawing attention to the illusory nature of the world that the film depicts.

The idyll is suddenly interrupted by the appearance of a man and his bodyguards who surround the group on their way to a party. There is an irreducible ambiguity in the behavior of the men: the leader is seemingly soft-spoken, even friendly at times. Yet, there is an underlying violence in his orders and in the silent compliance of the bodyguards as they direct everybody to a clearing. To lend legitimacy to their inspection, the men move a table and a chair into the frame transforming nature into a stage for the ad hoc court procedures. The leader orders the guests to spread out and line up within an imaginary square claiming that they are confined by prison walls. The scene is a great example of doublethink: despite knowing that it is a ruse everybody complies with the abusers' absurd game. One female guest, for instance, asks to be let out to go to the toilet and acts as if an imaginary door was opened to let her out. Since the guards and the prisoners all accept this ludicrous fantasy to be real and act upon it as such, the obvious illusion starts to work as reality for the participants. The official carnival (the game of investigation as well as the party) acquires power over reality through the compliance of the participants.

The different members of the group respond differently to their illusory imprisonment. Some are obedient and follow the orders; others try to reason with the capturers, but only a couple of them question its legitimacy or try to escape. The majority believes in what is proposed to them as reality (the prosecution) or else they act enthusiastically in what they see as a game. By scrutinizing the different reactions of the individuals to their situation, T*he Party and Its Guests* examines how power corrupts its

subjects and how it interpolates them. It mocks those who use power in an authoritarian manner, but also those who mechanically comply with being ruled. Showing the absurd in the workings of hegemony ridicules its overbearing power as well as those who mindlessly participate in it.

As the events unfold, the absurd void between how reality is presented (a party in a natural idyll) and what it is (an artificially orchestrated, obligatory carnival) grows wider. We quickly find out that the imprisonment was part of a game, and Rudolf (Jan Klusák) and his men are themselves only guests at his stepfather's birthday party who suddenly appears on the stage to "straighten things out." The new leader redefines the group's role again and treats them as honorary guests, which points to the fundamental arbitrariness of totalitarian power. His appearance renders everything we have witnessed so far to be a lie and places yet another figure at the center of power. His claim that Rudolf is only a misbehaving child and that the investigation is just a silly misunderstanding is supposed to override what we have perceived as the reality before. The repeated and sudden revamping of reality undermines its credibility. Lies and truth, fiction and reality, and celebration and imprisonment start to fold into each other and together they create the grotesque carnival of the party. Although the participants try to comply and follow the transitory logic of the party, they are puzzled and lost between being guests and being prisoners. There is something carnivalesque about the freedom with which power operates in the film: violence and mercy, pleasure and punishment are in constant oscillation and are randomly interchangeable.

Oftentimes, clichés appear in opposition to the context in which they were uttered. This is the case when the strange festivity ends abruptly as the leader suddenly decides to

hunt down the guest who escaped early on. Every male participant, including a freshly wed groom is called to join the hunt. As he is obliged to say good-bye to his bride, the exaggerated emotional language ("If I don't come back, plant roses…") turns the moment into a farce and a parody of melodramatic pathos. The groom's trivial departure and his linguistic rendering of the event stand in an absurd contradiction. Similarly to *The Firemen's Ball*, language is supposed to sanction the position of power, but it is ineffective because praise just like punishment is random and illogical.

In order to smooth out the turbulence in the hegemonic order (the runaway's refusal to participate in a celebration), the leader and the guests decide to bring him back by force. The decision is taken after long perverse discursive elaborations about how the man who has escaped must be unhappy now, so bringing him back will make him happy again. But the debate only legitimizes what has been decided already (the man must be punished for his noncompliance). Language once again molds reality to existing preconceptions.

In the fashion of absurdist drama, the film is without narrative closure. We are left waiting as the men depart on a collective hunting adventure. A gun suddenly appears and the last image fades into darkness while we hear a hunting dog's barking grow louder and louder. Such suspense throws a rather grim light on the ludicrous carnival that has gradually turned into its own reverse—a confining prison from where it is difficult to escape. The danger that *Report on the Party and Its Guests* posed to the communist system and the reason why it was banned, was that it disclosed the very nature of its ideology: namely, that it depended on coercion and discursive illusions and on everyone acting according to their assigned role in the communist masquerade. The fate of the film

itself eerily resembled that of the rebellious guest who broke out of the imaginary prison and simply walked away from the party. *Report on a Party and Its Guests* broke the rules of the communist "deception game." It declared the Emperor to be naked, and therefore the violence of censorship was needed to rectify the damage it caused in the official communist order.

Conclusions

The goal of this chapter was to unravel an important aesthetic component of Eastern European grotesque cinema, the absurd and argued that it played an essential role in exposing a fatal error in the communist system: that it could never resolve the glaring contradiction between reality and ideological mystification. Ultimately, the appeal of the absurd to the cultural imagination lay in the fact that it assisted Eastern Europeans in enduring and coming to terms with the historical reality in which they lived (Esslin 428). As Karel Kosík observes, from absurd laughter "is born a society of people who acknowledge each other, who do not laugh at each other but laugh together at their own ridiculousness […]" (185). The absurd aesthetic presented a fictional mirror to the incongruity and discursive overdetermination definitive of Eastern European reality, and the laughter it provoked was the healthiest response to this experience. The absurd provides a "lustful release from the shackles of logic" (Esslin 340) and breaks with the "determinism of meaning and significance" (Esslin 343). This gesture was crucial in liberating the mind from the communist "law of freedom" (Bakhtin 7) that attempted to generate a seemingly coherent but rather absurd ideological reality. The film comedies

can be read in a žižekian fashion as “acts”, as “intervention[s] in the social reality” that modified “the very coordinates of what is perceived as ‘possible’” (Žižek 2001: 167).

Such redefinition of the absurd within the framework of a grotesque realist aesthetic goes against the predominant, modernist readings that claim it to be a “non-realistic deformation” (Sotirova 49). Our discussion demonstrated that the absurd in Eastern European cinema is born from the mimetic relationship between artistic expression and a particular structuring of the world. Understanding the origin and popularity of the comedies in Eastern Europe is only possible within this new framework that pushes the absurd from being an artistic style rooted in the universal human condition towards a cultural response to a very real, historically specific condition of existence.

As early as 1969, Kosík writes about the failure of both communist and capitalist utopias. An unsolvable crisis crystallized by the 1960s that made obvious how socialism would not “carry out the epochal change [it] promised, but simply replace one system with another” (39). At the same time, as Kosík observes, this meant that there was no real alternative left to replace the alienating and exploitative capitalist system. When Kosík blames a “mysterious” self-asserting power for the “crisis of modernity” in Eastern Europe, he refers to the ideological superstructure as it inserted itself violently into the material base. The success or failure of this process depended primarily on the linguistic realm. The preservation of the communist political system was defined by how well it “mystified everything and obscured not only its own essence but the very essence of politics in general” (Kosík 17-18). Its failure was ultimately due to the fact that it falsified data, celebrated lies, and tried to have total control over information as well as the private

and public spheres in order to generate an image of reality that did not match the material existence of everyday life. Grotesque comedy was an early sign, a cultural recognition of what could not be expressed officially: the awareness that the communist ruse was unsustainable in the long run.

Communism indeed failed when it could no longer keep intact the tacit agreements of compliance, it could not successfully interpellate its ideological subjects or coerce them to play along in the grotesque carnival. The results of Stalinist totalitarian oppression were perceptible early on: the state-planned economies repeatedly collapsed, political censorship was tightened, people were confined in their movement and expression, the Party bureaucracy was utterly corrupt, political surveillance and persecution were widespread, and the 1956 and 1968 reform-revolutions were brutally defeated. At the same time, official statistics reported steady economic growth, and industrial as well as agricultural *over*production. Further, the state owned mass media heralded successful progress and hailed the state officials' "good work."

By the 1980s, the incongruence between base and superstructure became so extensive and so painfully obvious that no official language, no binding ideology, and no institutional policing could mend it. The "mind-game" of doublethink definitively collapsed in 1989, when the people refused to acknowledge the Emperor's new clothes anymore and when they stopped playing along with the communist-generated reality and declared it to be simply a fiction. The moment when the communist discursive authority revealed itself as a fiction—and with Gorbachev's "perestroika" it almost officially declared itself as such—was the moment when it lost power over reality. Impossible to

sustain the communist hegemony anymore, the architectural embodiment of the division between real and state-constructed life: in 1989 the Berlin Wall finally came down.

Reproducing the incongruities between reality and discourse through the absurd was the most successful way to unmask the nature of Eastern Europeans' encounter with history. Eugene Ionesco once claimed that there is only one way to demystify the relationship between hegemony and language: "by means of humor, especially if it is 'black'; logic is revealed by our awareness of the illogicality of the absurd; [...] the comic alone is able to give us the strength to bear the tragedy of existence" (Ionesco in Cornwell 128). I have demonstrated that absurd laughter in Eastern European cinema is born from specific social and political conditions and not from abstract existentialist questions. It reflects reality in that it is based on a "rupture between things and words, between things and the ideas that are their representation" (Artaud 7). The absurd in the film comedies is a cry of man "trying [...] to break out into freedom only to find himself newly imprisoned" (Esslin 401) in the perverse communist universe.

There was no greater damage to the communist authority than showing it to be a grotesque parody and a performance, and thus undermining its binding force over reality. The films discussed throughout the dissertation did this work. They presented the world as a ruse, an upside down carnival where all that seemed natural became unnatural, all that was normal became abnormal and the abnormal was presented as the norm. This subversive aspect made the grotesque especially suitable to reveal a fundamental condition in the communist world: a *lacuna* that separated real conditions from ideological perceptions while the latter violently overrode the former. The strong infusion between the absurd and the grotesque in Eastern European cinema confirms my argument

that the films mimetically reproduced and by doing so, demystified the operation of communist ideology.

During the 1960s and 70s the absurd helped increase a "system-awareness" that corresponded to Eastern Europeans' everyday experiences. It unveiled the cracks and the irrationalities in the communist Symbolic order and attempted to cut through the ideological veil by showing the incongruities between narrated and lived reality. This role placed the films in a small, but crucial counter-culture that challenged the aggressive, sophisticated, and manifold communist mystification, as it drew attention to the Emperor's nakedness. By disclosing the working of communist hegemony, the films ultimately liberated the viewers from the constraints of its twisted logic. In summary, the absurd unveils the discordance between ideological reality and material reality. It is also a way to critique language's inadequacies, overinflated status, and mystifying function. The grotesque comedies' inclination towards the absurd acknowledges both these elements. Ultimately, the films play a similar role to Václav Havel's greengrocer who chooses not to put up the communist slogans in his shop-window anymore. When he made this decision, he

> has not committed a simple, individual offense, isolated in its own uniqueness, but something incomparably more serious. By breaking the rules of the game, he has disrupted the game as such. He has exposed it as a mere game. He has shattered the world of appearances, the fundamental pillar of the system. He has upset the power structure by tearing apart what holds it together. He has demonstrated that living a lie is living a lie. He has broken though the exalted façade of the system, and exposed the real, base functions of power. He has said that the Emperor is naked. And because the Emperor is in fact naked, something extremely dangerous has happened: by his action the greengrocer has addressed the world. He has enabled everyone to peer behind the curtain. (171)

The greengrocer, by declining to put up the communist slogans in his shop-window refuses to be a silent accomplice to the communist façade. Similarly, the films examined in this dissertation refused to "put up slogans," to play the totalitarian language game of the communist hegemonic powers. Instead they pointed to the political system's basic condition: its deformations and ineffective performativity to which they responded with grotesque carnival. In its absurd element, just like the greengrocer, Eastern European cinema managed to peek behind the curtain and to show the "world as it is," to shout out in the middle of carnival that "The Emperor is naked!"

Chapter 2

Nostalgia and The Carnivalization of History

"*There is no reason why a nostalgia conscious of itself,
a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on grounds of
some remembered plentitude, cannot furnish as
adequate a revolutionary stimulus as any other*." (Jameson 1972: 68)

In the first chapter I showed that the absurd element in cinema unmasks an irresolvable conflict between communist ideology and material reality in Eastern Europe. In what follows, I continue the same line of thought, but will turn my attention to the question of history and memory. In order to preserve its power, the communist state depended on imposing its ideology over reality not only in the present but also in the past. The communist system relied primarily on language and discursive tools to maintain its mystifications, and so "the first step to getting the crisis under control [was] the elimination of mystification" (Kosík 18). By disclosing the discursive mechanisms of control and by revealing the discrepancy between language and its referents, between ideology and material conditions, Eastern European comic cinema played an important role in demystifying the grotesque nature of communism. It utilized a specific sense of humor to eliminate the ideological mystification by mocking the aforementioned incongruent relationship between reality and language. The incongruity between ideology and reality manifested itself in the ways the communist state rendered history, in the volatile and aggressive alterations and radical reinterpretation of the (pre-)communist past that would legitimize the incumbent powers. The films, I argue, *carnivalize* official history through grotesque comedy in order to bring the void between official

recollections of the past and subjective memory to the surface. By “carnivalize” I mean that the films rewrite often painful and tragic events in history in positive, regenerative, and liberating terms through the processes of “disremembering” and “rememory” (Walker 16).[8] This often takes the form of *nostalgia evoked through the mundane and the everyday*, which connects the past to the present and crosses boundaries between imagination and reality, life and death, material and conceptual.

The story opening Milan Kundera’s book, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979) is a revealing example of how the communist state strove to have full control over history and memory. Kundera describes a photograph that relates the birth of communist Bohemia to the technological manipulations of remembering and forgetting. The iconic photograph shows Klement Gottwald, leader of the Communist Party giving a famous speech on the balcony of a Baroque palace in Prague, while his comrade and close friend Clementis is standing by him. Soon after this photo was taken, the communist leadership charged Clementis with treason and subsequently hanged him. The government’s propaganda section immediately removed him from all existing photographs in an attempt to erase his memory from history. Clementis’ noticeable absence from the picture betrays the manipulability of memory regarding this crucial event in Bohemia’s history. Clementis’ disappearance from the famous historical photograph tells us much about the organic relationship between technologies of memory and official revisions of history.

The photographic image, because it is an indexical version of reality, has important implications for collective memory. As Paul Connerton observes, “the absence

[8] Janet Walker defines disremembering as “conjuring mental images and sounds related to past events but altered in certain respect” (16) and rememory as “the use of one’s imaginative power to realize a latent, abiding connection to the past” (ibid.).

of the object and the codes by which we make sense of this absence [the conventions]" (78) make the photographic image a technology of remembrance. Yet, precisely because of its technical manipulability, the image also becomes a battlefield of competing narratives about the past. Its indexical nature can help control the official recollections of the past, but it can also provide an opportunity for the collective imagination to look for hidden connections and reconfigurations of history. Just like the manipulated picture that bears witness to the alterations in official memory about the birth of communism in Bohemia, the re-imagination of the past through cinema proposes alternative realities in Eastern Europe's twentieth century history. It brings into focus figures, such as Clementis, who suddenly reappear in our memories to tell a very different story.

During the fifty years of communist rule, Eastern Europeans underwent a combination of collective historical traumas. Some traumas were "dramatic and soul-destroying", while others, born out of loss and humiliation, were "quiet and humiliating" (Luhrmann 158). Part of the quiet, everyday traumas of communist life was an officially orchestrated and imposed break with the past as well as the radical rewriting of history to obtain legitimacy for the incumbent regimes.[9] The films rely on the "freedom of fantasy" (Bakhtin 49) to deal with these quiet traumas of historical amnesia. They present an alternative vision of the past and thus indicate the failure of official history to take over all spheres of collective memory. I argue that, by focusing on memories of mundane life through nostalgia, the films open the past to otherwise unimaginable possibilities, and ultimately free the present itself from the ideological confinements of communist history.

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[9] For a detailed discussion on communist historiography see Verdery, Esbenshade, Valkenier, and the special issue of *American Historical Review*.

The exercise of control over public memory had a definitive role in the hierarchies of communist power. Remembrance of the past, except in carefully orchestrated and ritualized ways, was dangerous because it could undermine the political system's self-projection as absolute, universal, and innate—or as Bakhtin puts it, an "unconditional necessity" (49). Under these circumstances, cinema played a crucial role in generating collective memories that offset official historiography. Through nostalgia, the films restored a subjective memory that empowered the collective to question the official communist histories. By restructuring the past through memories of the mundane and the everyday, Eastern European cinema undermined communist history driven by high ideology and ultimately recovered a crucial sense of *referentiality* (a correlation between ideology and reality, between subject and history, the body and memory) that was missing from communist existence.

The current scholarship often interprets nostalgia in negative terms and associates it with spectacle and subjective memory—an attempt to escape history and to deny the present in favor of the past.[10] Moreover, most discussions consider either *melodrama* (Boym, Cook, Kaplan) or *tragedy* (Wang) as the primary channels for nostalgic memory. Melodrama offers relatively safe ways to remember the past by substituting history with pastiche and representing it "in an oblique form" (Kaplan and Wang 9). Different from its typical melodramatic or tragic configurations, I see grotesque comedy as a productive locus for nostalgic memories. I argue that the laughter evoked by the films prevents nostalgia from falling into the most common trap: glossing over the trauma while compensating with extra emotionality and sentimentality. I will investigate how nostalgia

[10] For a comprehensive overview of the nostalgia-debate, see Chapter 3 in Radstone 2007.

in a comic setting gave a crucial if momentary sense of liberation from the tight control of the communist ideological order. In their nostalgic disremembering and rememory, the films took on a *witness* position regarding the past. Their treatment of the past is comparable to what Svetlana Boym identifies as "reflective nostalgia" (2001: 49), the kind of nostalgia that defamiliarizes and enables one to recognize the absurdities of the present by looking at the past and to face collective traumas in a less painful way. Through comic nostalgia the films disrupted the dominant historical narratives that insisted on communism being the culmination of an evolutionary process and a question of material dialectics.

To demonstrate my point, I will analyze *Closely Watched Trains* (*Ostre sledované vlaky*, Jiří Menzel, 1966) and *Old Time Football* (*Régi idők focija*, Pál Sándor, 1973). I will show that their memory-work helped to envision ways in which the collective could resist hegemonic memory. *Old Time Football* shows the interwar period, its political extremism and economic hardships and calls for the formation of a collective solidarity (through national football) that outlives this historical crisis. *Closely Watched Trains*, on the other hand, connects sexual pleasure with political agency in its re-imagination of Czechoslovakia's participation in World War II, and so brings the viability of political resistance from the past into the present.

When Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as "an effective yearning for a community with collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world" (2001: xiv), she means that nostalgic memory's primary function is to bring hope to the hopelessness of the present by creating *pleasant* memories of the past. To "keep alive the longing for alternative historical narratives" (Wang 14) is to reframe the present in light of an

ideal(ized) past. We insist that the past used to be "a better place," compare it to current conditions, and thus automatically demand change. The nostalgia evoked in both films gave voice to collective desires that by the 1960 were dashed by the official road to communist utopia. It transformed dark moments from the pre-communist era into a world of fantasy that undermined the absolute seriousness of official history.

The communist state's various projects of forced urbanization, accelerated industrialization and labor experiments produced neither lasting security nor capital in Eastern Europe. Instead, a schizophrenic void appeared between the individual and the state.[11] The nostalgic element in Eastern European cinema throws light on the crisis in the collective consciousness during communism: the "doublethink" regarding not only the present but also the past. It implied the simultaneous awareness of the obvious erasures/lies as part of the public discourse about the past and the participation in official rituals that produced them. The nostalgic treatment of history as an everyday practice energized the collective by betraying the falsifications and perversions of official history. Through the process of disremembering and rememory the films restored a sense of "aura" that was not a form of ideological mystification, like Walter Benjamin claims, but precisely the opposite: it was an attempt to counter communist alienation and reification (Wang 184-187) through a (re)turn to the past. By re-establishing the connection between self and history, the films created a sense of belonging and unity—an aura that gave agency to the collective against the paralyzing, communist mystifications of memory. The comic aspect in the films also strengthened the sense of aura because it turned the past into an accessible, mundane place.

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[11] When politics meant participating in corrupt state power and control, the resistance chose "the politics of anti-politics," which meant a complete withdrawal from the "high" political sphere and a turn towards constructing a civil society. See Konrád, Havel, and Ost.

To once again turn to Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: if "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" then cinematic memory played a crucial role in Eastern Europeans' efforts to resist communist coercion and manipulation. The therapeutic laughter brought into focus the silent traumas of communism in ways that the collective imagination could deal with. This distinct form of cinematic memory "form[ed] an arena of resistance to the dominant national culture" (Sturken 257). Nostalgia in its comic rendering offered a creative and liberating cultural response to political oppression, to historical propaganda, and to the tacit consent of communist doublethink. It constituted part of Eastern European counter-memory that through laughter, according to Bakhtin, brought the world closer to man (11).

Old Time Football

In times of historical crisis, the collective imagination often depends on individual agents as instruments of resistance and critique. They do not succumb to injustice but try to "forge a collective solidarity that forms a unified front out of loose and weak individuals" (Wang 43). Their determination and commitment ultimately facilitates the formation of a collective body from isolated, helpless individuals. The nostalgic hero is always a nucleus of community formation, a conduit through which a collective different from the present one becomes imaginable. The protagonist of the Hungarian cult classic, *Old Time Football (*dir. Pál Sándor) is an outstanding example of collective self-empowerment through memory. The film has been hugely popular ever since its release in 1973. Iván Mándy's brilliant screenplay in the hands of the director, Pál Sándor and an

all-star cast ensured that it has remained a campy, cult classic. It has been viewed by an estimated one million people, about 10% of Hungary's total population.[12]

Ede Minarik, the main hero, is an eternal idealist, a devoted football coach who puts his team, "Csaba's Pearl SC [Csabagyöngye SC]"[13] ahead of any other interest. He is willing to risk everything, including his modest but stable laundry business to get his team together and to advance to the prime league. He lives by one code only, namely "You need a team! [Kell egy csapat!]" This refrain from the film quickly became a maxim with Hungarian audiences. It expresses Minarik's desire for a successful football team, but also to belong to a strong collective. The story takes place in 1924, before the golden times of football in Hungary. Minarik, a chaplinesque character, bitterly comments on the dismal present conditions in sportsmanship. He is nostalgic for the relatively stable period before World War I (the time of amateur football), which he lovingly remembers as being characterized by a selfless dedication to the sport.

Given the time when the film was made (the early 1970s, after the Hungarian national team's decline on the international stage), these nostalgic feelings perhaps refer to the strong sentimentality surrounding the famous Hungarian "Golden Team [Aranycsapat]" of the 1950s. The incredible victory of the Golden Team against the all-star English team in 1953 (final score: 6-3) entered the national consciousness as one of the most heroic moments in Hungary's history. This was not simply a victory of Hungarian sport; it was also a symbolic defeat of the arrogant, capitalist West. The Golden Team went on undefeated for an unprecedented 33 games afterwards. 1956, however, brought an end to the golden era of Hungarian football as well as the reformist

[12] *Filmspirál* 5.5 (1999): 182-191.
[13] The name is impossible to translate well, but it refers to a type of Hungarian wine, and connotatively to the value of Hungarian national pride.

movement inside the Communist Party. As the revolution broke out, several players on their way home from Brussels decided to stay in the West, and never again played football in Hungary. Therefore, the abrupt end of the Hungarian football's golden era was closely tied to the traumatic events of the 1956 revolution, and has always been commemorated in terms of national mourning.

Collective memory inseparably connects the collapse of the Hungarian national team with the end of national independence and the lost hopes of socialist reform. The popularity of *Old Time Football* during communism was due to the nostalgia that it evoked through the allegory of football for national prosperity, solidarity, and independence before the Soviet occupation. A nostalgia for the golden age of Hungarian football deepened over time, since the Hungarian national team, except for a short time period in the 1980s, never recovered from its downward spiral. In the Postcommunist period, the film maintained its popularity as the reemerging national collective once again looked back with nostalgia at these (g)olden times for Hungarian football, as well as national solidarity. The immense popularity of *Old Time Football* even after 1989 can be interpreted as a sign of the continuing desire to recover the sense of collectivity through football and to revive national pride against Hungary's marginalized and colonized position in global capitalism. "You always need a team!" carries different connotations for each generation, but it also has a unified meaning. It indicates a small country's desire, that perceives itself as continuously battered by history, to achieve national prosperity and solidarity through sport. Ede Minarik, a nostalgic and comic figure, willingly carries the burden of building such a collective (the team) in this much-celebrated Hungarian film.

At the beginning of the film, the players unreservedly support Minarik: they abandon whatever they happen to be doing when he calls for practice. One leaves work, another his family, another interrupts a visit to the brothel, while Kövesi, the reserve player who is a dedicated communist agitator, leaves a group of workers, interrupting their political mobilization. Although he has no talent, Kövesi is an indispensable part of the team precisely because of his commitment to the "Csaba's Pearl SC." His inclusion on the team reveals precisely what is at stake in Minarik's struggle. It is not necessarily success but a sense of collective cohesion that Minarik desires. Kövesi is a great example of how the film re-imagines the past both in nostalgic and in farcical terms. His feeble, clownish figure embodies the state of socialism in the 1920s—a delicate hope that had been lost by 1969 and was ridiculed after 1989. The comic traits in Kövesi's character, his boundless enthusiasm paired with his utter incompetence to play football present socialism as viable (against the growing support of Nazi Germany) but at the same time also ridiculous and hopeless in the historical conditions of the 1930s and the 1970s.

Minarik is openly nostalgic for the "better times" when, as he repeatedly points out, the players used to be satisfied with a pair of football shoes and did not request a monthly salary. Eager to play their best, their commitment to the game and to the team back then was unreserved. He often compares the ideal(ized) past to the disheartening year of 1924. When he is asked the question "Who makes a team great? [Ki tesz naggyá egy csapatot?]," his answer is that, disappointingly, every player expects to be paid well and "Nowadays only money matters! [Manapság csak a pénz számít!]" The foremost example of moral deterioration is Vallai, the talented goalkeeper who, on his girlfriend's insistence, asks to be reimbursed for his tram tickets. For Minarik, Vallai's demand to get

paid is a shameful violation of his dedication to the team, especially since he is aware of Minarik's financial difficulties.

The past materializes in exaggerated and nostalgic ways through Minarik's personal memory. In his imagination he becomes a "football superhero." A flashback to his past reveals that he was once a famous football player himself. The slow motion sequence shows Minarik running across the football field. The background of the image is completely frozen as the camera closely follows him pursuing the ball, moving between the motionless players, and finally kicking a goal. The hazy quality of the image, the background music, and the slow motion indicate a time and space outside the digetic frame lending a strong surreal character to the scene. As if a photograph was coming alive, Minarik's motions are placed in the middle of a temporal and spatial standstill visually reconstructing his own subjective memory of the event as larger than life. The only sound accompanying the scene is the Hungarian national anthem, which further emphasizes the grandiosity of this past victory. The glamour and magnitude of Minarik's role in the triumph of the national team is exaggerated by both the sound and the camerawork. Finally, in a surreal and comic turn the great hero is suddenly elevated from the ground and flies, like an angel, through the air. Minarik's angelic figure slowly disappears in the sky. The national anthem accompanies his angelic departure ironically disclosing that the dream-like, unreal sequence is a product of Minarik's rich imagination. This scene re-imagines the past as glorious by linking together the mundane sphere of football with the high ideal of national pride. The absolute non-serious physical sport takes the place of the absolute serious national ideology.

In the present, Minarik faces failure when it becomes clear that Vallai will not turn up for the last, crucial match because two rival managers and a seductive cabaret dancer (Cecilia Esztergályos) have lured him away to Barcelona. Minarik decides that he himself will step in as the goalkeeper. Like the famous Robinson, whose tragic story is repeated several times throughout the movie, he puts a gun by his side as a gesture that he will kill himself if a goal is scored. The game is fierce and the distressed Minarik saves three balls from landing behind the line. After the third attempt, in a surprising turn, he simply walks away and leaves everything behind. Minarik's seemingly illogical abandonment of the game shows a fundamental difference between his and Robinson's heroism. Minarik did everything in his potential to fulfill the dream of bringing his team success. However, when fate repeatedly betrayed him, he readily admits defeat and moves on. His grandness is not self-sacrificial; instead it lies in his being able to survive the hard times and knowing the right moment to walk away from his ideals. Minarik is aware of his own limits to take on the hostile world. He is ready not only to fight but also to compromise, not only to appear but, if necessary, also to withdraw from the battlefield of history.

The hero's reappearance at the end of the film shows an important determination and creativity to face the limitations of the present. Nostalgia propels Minarik forward to do all he can to bring a successful, new team together. He relies on his ability to remember when he depicts the present as morally corrupt and dysfunctional. His subjective memories give him a particular perspective and fuel the hope to overcome failure. Minarik's nostalgia opens the possibility for historical change. His figure enacts a

vital role in resurrecting the hope for a (national) community different from the communist collective body proposed by the regime.

Old Time Football presents official history and collective memory in conflict. The economic, political and moral damage of World War I pushed Hungary towards the Great Depression and fascist dictatorship. Yet, the slowly developing historical disaster stays in the background of the story and is only alluded to in indirect ways. The growing economic problems after the Great War appear in a highly aestheticized way, for instance, when Minarik is chasing a young football talent through a long line of unemployed and homeless people waiting for their daily provisions. Poverty, filth and famine are presented in lyrical and defamiliarizing ways through the soundtrack and the split screen. The screen becomes dark and is split into two parts: on the left the text of "The Lord's Prayer" appears, while on the right through a "peeping hole" we see unemployed, hopeless masses as they stand in line while chanting the prayer. The highly unnatural shots remind the audience of the dismal historical conditions in the 1930s in self-reflexive and non-melodramatic ways.

Minarik fights his way to the front of the food-line to catch up with the boy who seemed to slip away from him. As before, his movements are in stark opposition to the stillness of the crowd. The camera focuses on his body while the space around him is frozen like a photograph. Later, while he desperately searches for the boy on the shore of the river Danube, the mise-en-scène reveals surreal lights and ghost-like people moving about in the darkness of the night and a musician playing his violin. When he finally catches up with the young boy on a ferryboat crossing the Danube, Minarik finds himself in the middle of a tragic historical event. The intertitles clarify the historical moment that

this image references, namely that in 1924 anti-Semitic youth blew up a ferryboat crossing the Danube that was carrying members of the socialist workers' movement.

While official history is acknowledged in this scene, it is consciously filtered through Minarik's subjective memory and imagination. The scene's cinematic presentation is surreal and openly staged. As the boat suddenly blows up, the bloody disaster is symbolically represented by firecrackers and people jumping into the water. Minarik and the boy's survival is announced in a humorous vein: on the shore the boy tries to breathe life into Minarik using his arms as a pump. The coach, meanwhile, keeps spitting up water like a fountain. This exaggerated, surreal, and humorous treatment of history turns it on its head. Throughout the film, there is only one reference to Adolf Hitler's growing popularity in Germany—a newspaper article with the title "The Big Lawsuit and Its Heroes: Hitler and Lundendorf." Minarik reacts to the headline with a question: "Who is Hitler?" This absurd naiveté is surprising to the viewer. Yet, within the context of the film, Minarik's cluelessness is a manifestation of the collective desire to return to restore the historical innocence that preceded fascism. Minarik's question posits history and subjective memory completely entangled setting up as an unsolvable paradox between the desire *and* the impossibility to remember accurately as well as to willingly forget.

Another example of the regenerative function of memory in the film is the recurring motif of the "zsíroskenyér" (bread with lard). The "zsíroskenyér" that Minarik repeatedly tries to devour is a slice of the past bringing back joyful memories of childhood. Yet, every time Minarik sits down to eat his meal, something interrupts him and he cannot get to it, which causes him endless frustration. The recurrent interruptions

echo a symbolically much more significant lack: Minarik's inability to return to the desired, golden past with the help of the "Csaba's Pearl SC." The "zsíroskenyér" has its own mythical place in the popular Hungarian imagination. It is a nostalgic icon of simpler, old times when (supposedly) people could be satisfied by very little. For the poor agrarian workers it only took a slice of "zsíroskenyér" to feel comfortable and content. The bread with lard is a material mediator through which Minarik remembers in many ways more deprived but somehow happier times. Eating it is comforting for the body and the soul; for Minarik, just like for most Hungarians it carries memories of past pleasures.

Old Time Football treats the history of cinema in a nostalgic manner: film itself becomes a battleground between remembering and forgetting. Similarly to *Cinema Paradiso* (1988) with its idealized memories of childhood, it creates a nostalgic picture of the vanishing culture of movie going. Its memory work reflects on the changing film industry at the end of the silent film era. The preoccupation with (cinematic) memory is present in narrative and aesthetic terms. Although it cannot be defined as a silent movie, the film borrows many of its technical and formal characteristics. The music, the properties of the image, the editing, the exaggerated acting and the intertitles pay homage to the genre of the burlesque and re-create the aura of early filmmaking. There is almost no dialogue in the film; instead, intertitles fill the gaps in the story and a continuous music score supplies the necessary melodramatic, comic or tragic ambiance. The few dialogues are fragmented and ungrammatical. The film stock is often sped up or slowed down to reproduce the differences and inconsistencies in the shutter speed of early films. The actors on the screen move either too fast or out of synch with our normal perception

of speed. All these characteristics, together with the haziness and brownish tone of the film stock, indicate a playful and nostalgic mimicry of burlesque aesthetics.

Minarik's love for the movies becomes apparent when he visits the cinema. While he is waiting for his old friend, the owner of the movie theater, he joyfully greets the pictures of silent film stars and also parodies their gestures. Charlie Chaplin himself appears on an advertising poster for his film, *The Kid* (1921). Minarik tilts his hat in front of his image greeting the "master" whom he admires and impersonates. His physical gestures resemble Chaplin and Buster Keaton's burlesque corporal comedy. Throughout the film, Minarik wears the distinctive Chaplin hat and coat. His facial and bodily gesticulation is exaggerated and emotionally very expressive. He climbs, jumps, and runs in a clumsy way usually provoking disaster around himself. At a certain moment, for instance, Minarik tries to get into a hotel where a group of referees, are dining, but he gets stuck in the revolving door behind one referee whose leg is broken and whom he was allegedly trying to help. Chaplin's characteristic physical humor is fully reproduced here. The prolonged scene shows an enthusiastic Minarik, the crippled referee and the hotel guard who came to their help, all trapped in the door unable to escape because it keeps spinning back and forth. Minarik's burlesque comedy evokes nostalgic memories of the silent film era, but it also brings down history to the level of the corporal.

The most significant conduit of nostalgia for the fading silent movie culture is an old actress (Hédi Temessy) who appears several times in the film. First, we see her in the cinema bitterly commenting on the fact that Ernst Lubitch has lost the right to direct his new film, a possible allusion to the growing anti-Semitism in Germany. Although this is historically incorrect—Lubitch was already working in the USA in 1924—it is true that

he did not get along with his star and employer Mary Pickford. But he finished the movie *Rosita* with her in 1923, and then signed a three-year contract with Warner Brothers. The old lady also laments the disappearance from the film screen of stars like Lilian Gish and May Murray. Later she asks Minarik to dye her dress black because she is mourning Sarah Sweet who killed herself because she could not get significant movie roles anymore. Historically speaking, her lamentation is again inaccurate. Although Sweet's career diminished severely with the appearance of the talkies, she died in 1986 at the age of 90. How are we to interpret such subjective "disremembering" of history?

Through the "freedom of fantasy" (Bakhtin 49) the film intentionally generates a collective memory that overrides historical determinism. We need to understand the recurring "confabulations" (Walker xvii) to underline the coexistence of historical particularities and subjective memory: the old actress' mourning refers to the ongoing, general changes in filmmaking, to the unstoppable transformation of the very nature of cinema. Lilian Gish, May Murray, and Sarah Sweet are symbolic victims of the dramatic historical transformation in film production; they are the physical proof that, as she puts it, "film is not what it used to be. Today, they don't care about the details anymore."

The old actress' bitter commentary about Sarah Sweet's erasure from film memory is inaccurate historically, but her nostalgia for the early silent film era makes her statements valid. The money driven, artificial manipulation of star images so prominent today was born at the peak of the silent film era. New faces were constantly constructed for the viewers while old ones were quickly erased from film history. *Old Time Football* draws a parallel between the history of cinema and the history of Hungary showing how dominant ideological paradigms always maintain themselves by first depriving citizens of

their memory (Connerton 14). But it also shows that the subjective memory embodied by characters such as Minarik and the old actress can withstand perpetual historical change. The characters through their visceral memory and through the architectural spaces they inhabit (e.g. the small cinema, the laundromat) take an important witness position against the pressure to forget the old and see the new order as the only one. They speak, as Janet Walker observed, to the "ethical and political obligation to remember" and confirm that memory "is rooted in the conflict and interplay among social, political, and cultural interests" (xviii).

Minarik makes several statements about the alienating materialism of the interwar period. His bitter disappointment finds a visual expression in the images of poverty, unemployment, corruption, and of growing political extremism. His humorous statements such as "We should press the pillow on the face of the whole world [Az egész világ fejére ra kell szorítani a kispárnát]" are critical reactions to the hopelessness of the present. Memories console Minarik when he faces an unquestionably grim reality in the 1920s turning his attitude from melancholic to hopeful. The overall idealism, irrational perseverance, and grotesque exaggeration (the physical humor and the burlesque) with which he fights for his team and the repeated declaration that "You need a team!" push the film away from tragedy and melancholia. Minarik learned from the past that defeat is temporary and there is always a possibility to create a new team. Individuals are interchangeable—but the idea of "the community/the team" has to be cherished and sustained against all odds. This message spoke to the Hungarian audience in the 1970s that was looking for ways to revive national solidarity and hope in the times of "socialist normalization" and Soviet military occupation. Nostalgia and grotesque humor insert

hope into the dim prospects of the communist present—they carnivalize history in a way that suspends historical determinism.

Instances such as Minarik's puzzled question about Hitler, or the surreal staging of poverty are not belittling Hungary's historical tragedies in the twentieth century. They are not attempts to erase traumatic memories from the collective consciousness. History is alluded to in indirect and symbolic ways as a *recognition* that the past is inevitably shaped by subjective memory. The momentary lapses in historical recollection evoked by the film should be read as attempts to build a subjective memory through "disremembering." The film is nostalgic for a past that seemed to be more peaceful and prosperous, an era before Hungary's tragic involvement in imperial, fascist, and communist political projects. Minarik's hopelessness is tied to the slowly deteriorating historical conditions of the 1920s.

The film places itself right in between two major crises in Hungary's twentieth century history in order to acknowledge both, but also to find a moment of productive innocence through disremembering, a moment that could become a source of agency and a much needed moment of resistance to official historical recollections. Like Minarik's subjective memory, the film offered viewers in the 1970s a connection to the past that was different from the communist propaganda. The nostalgic appraisal of the past was not an escape from the distresses of the communist present. Within the context of Minarik's comic performance and survivalist philosophy ("You need a team!") the past presented as better than the present is a sign of desire for change. Disremembering and rememory generated an alternative reality that like a motor propelled collective despair towards endurance and resistance.

Minarik's return at the very end of the film, after fleeing the disastrous game, connects his nostalgia for the past to the predicament of his present in order to reinvigorate the national collective. A group of disappointed fans are waiting at the railway station for the Hungarian national team's return (they lost against the Turks). Minarik joins the crowd in a moment of national mourning. Like several times before, the scene resembles a still photograph: no one moves and no one utters a word except for Minarik whose motion the camera follows closely. Cinematic time is frozen to transmit the affect of the collective shock. Minarik draws the conclusion as well: "There was a team! [Volt egy csapat!]" meaning that the tragic moment in the history of Hungarian football signifies the end of an era. As the train carrying the players pulls into the station, the crowd closes in and for a brief moment—before the police push them back—they voice their frustration by booing, holding up banners, and protesting. This instant of dissent is crucial because it discloses an existing—if repressed—demand for change. In the pain and anger of the crowd one can read the plea for something better, the desire to come out on top again one day.

Nostalgia reinvents the past by revisiting its unrealized dreams.[14] For Minarik, remembering the past in nostalgic terms serves as an anchor for the present. His memories ground him and envelop him against the ongoing turbulences ensuring that he does not give up on the future. He finds a renewed hope in the younger generation represented by the boy who at the very end suddenly reappears. Ready to finally enjoy his lard sandwich at the railway station, Minarik grudgingly shares it with the boy as a symbolic seal of their new alliance. The last visual tableau confirms the film's motto,

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[14] Svetlana Boym talks about the potential of the imaginary to compensate for failures in reality in her "Introduction" to The Future of Nostalgia.

"You need a team!" by showing Minarik and the boy happily devouring the lard sandwich together. The optimistic ending points towards a new horizon and celebrates Minarik's commitment to the collective. The final intertitles, "They *ate* happily ever after [És boldogan *ettek* amíg meg nem haltak]"[15] sets the present in a historical perspective and sends a positive, reinvigorating message about the possibility of survival in the 1960s when Eastern European societies witnessed the shattering of communist utopia. The film's ending places the material and the bodily at the centre of hope and survival. The bread and lard sandwich connects memory to the lower bodily stratum and thus it spoils the high aspirations of official history.

Old Time Football was an important site of cultural memory because it reconstructed the past through nostalgic and comic imagery that provided an alternative to the official historiography. Nostalgia and comedy focus collective memory on the everyday life such as bread, football, and cinema instead of war and fascism in a way that can resist the ritualized forms of public remembrance. It is interesting to note that the film insists that neither cinema nor football were what they used to be in 1924 and that both were only pale and degenerate imitations. Given the long and important tradition of sound cinema and the fact that the golden times in Hungarian football came only thirty years later, such an apocalyptic vision can only be ironic. Viewers in the 1970s were well aware of the developments in both cinema and football since the 1920s, as well as of the decline of the socialist utopian dreams. The film's nostalgia for the early twentieth century had a critical and positive orientation towards the communist present: it gave voice to the desire for national unity and solidarity in the post-1968 historical period, but

[15] "Ettek" is a pun on "éltek" in Hungarian, as the two verbs resemble each other formally. "They lived happily ever after" can easily be transformed to "They ate happily ever after" by changing just one letter.

it did so in a way that replaced tragedy with comedy, high ideology with survivalist materialism, and melodrama with laughter. The audiences relied on such joyful instances of cultural remembrance to address communism's failure. The films' unique representation of the past helped them imagine a different present and a better future.

The film blurs the absolute separation between past and present. It goes against the authorized narratives of history by creating a conduit of subjective memory, in this case through the perspective of a comic, in many ways grotesque figure, who holds up the past against the present in order to mobilize the collective towards a better future. The film performs an act of rememory as a way to show discontent towards the straightjacket of communist history. The counter-memory established by *Old Time Football* ultimately functions similarly to Bakhtin's second-world condition: it unlocks the collective consciousness from the chain of historical determinism and brings about "the potentiality of another world" (Bakhtin 48). If "reflective nostalgia" deals with the "unrealized dreams of the past and the visions of the future that became obsolete" (Boym 2001: xvi), then *Old Times Football* is nostalgic for the unrealized dreams of communism that never became the future that had been promised.

Closely Watched Trains

Another famous example of an empowering reinterpretation of history through comedy is Jiří Menzel's *Closely Watched Trains* (*Ostre sledované vlaky*, 1966). This film was probably the most important product of the life-long collaboration between the director and his writer-friend, Bohumil Hrabal. Menzel was one of the founding figures of the Czechoslovak New Wave cinema in the 1960s, a school characterized by avant-

garde technique, subtle humor, and strong political content. As a graduate of FAMU (the Czechoslovak Film School established in 1946) and one of the five directors he collaborated with in making the Czech New Wave's cinematic manifesto, *Pearls of the Deep (Perličky na dně*, Věra Chytilová, Jaromil Jireš, Jiří Menzel, Jan Němec, Evald Schorm, 1965), Menzel stood at the frontline of the cultural battle in the Czechoslovak reform process to achieve "socialism with a human face." *Closely Watched Trains* was his fourth movie, and this masterpiece of New Wave cinema brought him international acclaim when it won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film in 1966. The film continues to receive strong national and international attention today, being one of the most well-known and well distributed Eastern European movies.

Closely Watched Trains is based on Hrabal's short novel/screenplay with the same title inspired by an earlier, existentialist story called *The Legend of Cain* (*Legenda o Kainovi*) (Hames 70). The film follows Hrabal's text closely in presenting the perverse effects of World War II through the eyes of a young man, Miloš Hrma (Václav Neckár) whose name is already suggestive of his grotesque character—"Sweetheart Pussyhair." Miloš' first person narrative is constructed radically different in Hrabal's book and Menzel's film. The book starts in the middle of the story after Miloš' suicide attempt and psychological transformation and it moves back and forth between the past and the future. The film's linear temporality, on the other hand, emphasizes the gradual *change* in the hero.

Miloš' coming of age story during World War II creates memories that mobilize the disempowered population during communism to take control of the present. His experience as a dispatcher apprentice at a railway station in the German occupied

Czechoslovakia pushes the young Miloš from being an innocent boy to becoming an agent of history, an individual who takes responsibility and in the end, sacrifices his life in the partisan fight against the Germans. Nostalgic memory works in complex ways activating a desire for political resistance. The young hero's self-sacrifice for the collective re-envisions the past as a place where political resistance despite all odds was still possible.

Hubička, the train dispatcher (his name means "Tender Kiss" in English) plays a much more central role in the film than in the novel. He is Miloš' guide through a sexual and political awakening. A rebel, Hubička takes Miloš under his wing and, as a kind of father figure, steers him on his way to adulthood. His behavior reminds one of Švejk's typical Eastern European heroism—a heroism that focuses on bodily pleasure as a form of political engagement. Hubička's remarkable success with women becomes a model for Miloš as he suffers from adolescent sexual problems. Hubička assists Miloš in overcoming his sexual immaturity but he also fosters a political awakening in him. With his aid, Miloš turns from a sexually and politically passive and naïve boy into an active, independent hero who develops sexual confidence and political consciousness simultaneously.

The film opens with a photographic montage of Miloš' family history. He narrates the story of his great-grandfather, grandfather, and father describing the long "family tradition" to avoid work. As he talks straight into the camera, and while his mother is dressing him in his work uniform, Miloš' tells the fate of his great grandfather who fought against revolutionary students in Prague. He was hit so hard with a stone that he had to retire, luckily with a decent pension. His "tragic end" came when some

dockworkers beat him to death because he liked to make fun of them while they worked. His grandfather, who in the novel is presented as the only true hero, followed in the line of anti-heroes in the film. As a hypnotist, he tried to stop German tanks from entering the city by hypnotizing them. However, the experiment was unsuccessful and he died after being run over by a tank.[16] Finally, Miloš' father was a train engine driver before World War II, but he retired during the war. In the present time he did nothing other than timing trains as they went by the window. This geneology of "impotence" makes Miloš' transformation even more remarkable as he breaks away from an undoubtedly powerless private history.

A series of photographic images form a collage to "objectively" support Miloš' subjective memory. However, like Clemetis' disappearance from the photos in Kundera's text, the images have obviously been manipulated to fit the story. The visual montage of tanks, guns, soldiers, workers, and trains is carefully constructed to fit the story, but they have no actual tie to Miloš' life. These images simultaneously validate and undermine Miloš' narrative. The photographs' indexicality is supposed to ground his story. It is supposed to authenticate Miloš' subjective memory with material proof. The images are obviously fictional however, the artificial arrangement makes them deeply suspicious. Within the context of Miloš' storytelling, the photographs serve as a critical commentary on the contradiction between official historiography and subjective memory. Ultimately, this opening scene encapsulates the film's overall preoccupation with the relationship between individual memory and historical recollection. I see the film's collective "disremembering" not as untruth or without historiographic value, but as "memory in

[16] Not unlike the butcher in György Konrád's story.

resistance" (Laub 57), an act of self-empowerment that opposes hegemonic and monolithic forms of remembering.

Life at the train station seems to fulfill Miloš' initial desire to stay away from history (the ongoing war). In this idyllic world everything seems to run smoothly. There is hardly any work to be done since the train traffic under the German occupation is scarce. The stationmaster has plenty of time to raise and pamper his beloved pigeons and rabbits, while the rest of the workers spend most of their time sleeping. In Hrabal's novel, the stationmaster shows his discontent with the German occupation by replacing his German pigeons with Polish ones. But the same character in the film shows no sign of political awareness, which makes the transformation in Miloš' political consciousness so much more powerful.

Miloš' life initially revolves around learning how and when to switch the rails and daydreaming about his girlfriend—Masha, the ticket controller. His attitude starts to change, however**,** when Zednicek, the councilor of the Czech railway system and an ally to the Nazi regime, arrives with his team to explain the new German military strategy and its impact on the train station. While Zednicek enthusiastically describes how the Germans have "tactically withdrawn" on all fronts in order to "win the war," Hubička interrupts him several times asking a seemingly simple question again and again: "Why?" Zednicek gets more and more irritated by this straightforward demand for a logical explanation for the obvious contradictions in the Nazi "success story." Finally, Miloš himself mimics his mentor by asking the same question—a gesture of naïve curiosity that upsets the false rationality of the German war strategy because it demands a basic logic in a world that has none.

The perverse logic of the war is visually reproduced in the scene where Zednicek leaves the station. Earlier, the committee arrived in a railcar that rolled into the station to much fanfare. At the end of their visit, the officials once again get into the railcar and slowly roll out into the distance—backwards. This comic reversal of the railcar's movement works as a visual metaphor alluding to the twisted nature of the world itself. The reversal simultaneously imitates *and* mocks the perversion of German ideological rationale. The backward spatial movement visually encapsulates the inverted logic of the war itself.

At this point in the film, it is evident that Miloš cannot fully comprehend what is going on around him. While the other station workers are cursing the Germans, he is preoccupied only with sex and tries to peek into a train car where some German nurses are stationed. A more radical transformation happens when Miloš blows his chance to consummate his love for Masha because he is paralyzed by his untimely ejaculation. His miserable failure in her uncle's photography shop is immediately followed by a historical disaster, when in the morning the town is bombarded and completely destroyed. In the middle of the rubble we see Miloš in a bed intact, but his soul is as shattered as the buildings around him. He is traumatized by the internal and external devastation. In order to escape from the disintegrating world, in a moment of true existential crisis, he decides to end his life. "I'm not a real man and I don't even want to be one," he claims, admitting to his physical and political impotence. The statement is an indication of his naïve and stubborn resistance to the ongoing changes not only inside his body but also in the world around him. Ultimately, this moment of complete physical and historical degradation (his sexual failure, attempted suicide, and the bombing of the town) drives Miloš toward

adulthood. After the doctor in the hospital explains to him that his problem—ejaculation praecox—is very common and easily treatable, Miloš decides to cure himself at any cost. He recognizes that "when I was to act, I flopped," but he also promises that he will not "flop" the second time around: neither sexually nor politically.

The change in Miloš from a passive bystander to an active agent in the political resistance takes another major turn when a group of Nazi officers, not trusting the Czechoslovak political alliance, kidnap him (instead of Hubička by accident) and keep him to guarantee the Czechs' cooperation. As Miloš is awaiting his fate with a gun pointed to his head, there is a surprising cut to the passing countryside. The series of images show the idyllic village life where people stroll comfortably with their animals and peasants peacefully work in their fields. Mellifluous and joyful music accompanies this sustained interruption to the narrative. The scene lacks an organic relationship with the ongoing war narrative and as such it stands out particularly strongly as a symbolic expression of Miloš' nostalgic desire for the peaceful, comfortable everyday routine. Miloš' escape from the train can be interpreted as accidental since the officer in charge notices the suicide scars on his wrists and out of pity decides to spare his life and to let him go. In the novel, the officer's decision to let him go comes from a clear recognition of camaraderie as he himself wears the sign of a severe wound on his face.

There is one last experience that brings Miloš' historical agency full circle. His interest and involvement in the political resistance goes hand in hand with his first successful sexual encounter which shows a strong link between the erotic and political libido. When he arrives back at the station, Hubička is so happy to see him alive that he decides to let Miloš in on a secret plot against the Germans to blow up one of their

important, "closely watched" trains. Miloš' sexual and political innocence are lost simultaneously as Hubička arranges an affair for him with the seductive and experienced Victoria Freie ("victory free"), the secret agent who delivers the bomb. The morning after the event, Miloš excitedly declares with a pair of scissors in his hand that: "I cut myself off from the past!" and now "I'm not afraid of anything!" These declarations refer to the end of Miloš' sexual timidity, but on a symbolic level they also allude to a final and conscious break from his political ignorance and "impotence."

The fact that Miloš' sexual and political "masculinization" happens simultaneously is clear from the way he reacts to Masha's sudden visit with confidence and asks her to wait for his return. He now has the power to make deliberate decisions and to assume agency in history. In Hrabal's novel, from the beginning it is Miloš who is in charge of dropping the bomb on the train. The film, however, makes this action accidental emphasizing the arbitrary and everyday nature of heroic action in Eastern Europe. Miloš replaces Hubička in the guerilla act because Hubička is cross-examined due to an earlier liaison with one female coworker and thus he cannot leave the office.[17] Miloš makes a decision on the spot to sneak out the bomb and finish the attack himself. He is in full control of his body as well as his actions.

The last part of the movie places Miloš' sacrifice and Hubička's trial in ironic opposition. Inside the train station, Zednicek is giving a speech about the primitive, animalistic nature of the Czech people. His main example is Hubička who embodies the corrupt morality of the Czechs. In the meantime, a parallel scene follows Miloš as he throws the bomb on the train and soon after is shot dead. The crosscutting of the two

[17] This instance is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

scenes suggests an innate relation between Hubička's sexual rebellion and Miloš' political revolt. Showing the two events in parallel creates incongruence between "heroic" Nazis and the "cowardly" Czechs. Through parallel cutting, the film juxtaposes Zednicek's twisted logic with the reality of military resistence. The absurdity of the Nazi's perception as heroes is opposed to the humility and simplicity of the "stupid Czech" Miloš' self-sacrifice.

The argument for universal humanism is repeated at the end of the novel where Miloš describes at length his own death as well as the German soldier's after they shot each other. The film is not concerned with such humanist message. Instead it presents Miloš' death as accidental in a minimalist way that avoids melodrama. The camera does not record his death; he simply falls down onto a train car and is carried away into the distance. There is no close-up detail, nor strong extradigetic music to strengthen the sense of tragedy. Nobody is crying; in fact, the scene closes with Hubička's triumphant laughter celebrating Miloš' successful mission. The film in its aesthetic choices keeps melodrama at bay and creates an alternative representation of self-sacrifice that is not grand and melodramatic but arbitrary and as such accessible to everybody. The idea of a universal human race destroying itself and the moral condemnation of war is replaced in the film by the particular historical conflict between Germans and Czechs that emphasizes the possibility of resistance through random acts of heroism. Miloš' feeble and immature body becomes a political entity in the film blurring the boundaries between public and private, heroes and everyday people. *Closely Watched Trains* mobilizes the experience of the flesh as part of a collective, political force. When Miloš overcomes sexual failure, he is finally able to act as a physically and politically autonomous subject.

His death is a tragic but necessary sacrifice for the survival of the collective. His delicate body serves as a conduit through which cultural memory can re-imagine the traumatic past to find sense in the complete senselessness of the war, and ultimately also envision a possibility of resistance.

As Miloš fulfills his burning sexual desire, he overcomes his impotent personal history and is reborn as a deliberate agent of political action. His story fulfills a collective desire to tell an alternative (hi)story that is not defeatist but heroic, not tragic but triumphant, a heroic story available to anybody. *Closely Watched Trains* is a good example of a "reflective nostalgia" that calls for the positive but also critical reassessment of the past. This coming-of-age story represents traumatic history differently from official narratives. The film's recollection of the past in terms of corporal, everyday heroism goes against the disempowering historical narratives that lament Czechoslovakia's fate as a victim of Nazi Germany during the war and a victim once again of Soviet occupation in 1968.

In its therapeutic potential, *Closely Watched Trains* cures Miloš from his suffering: it grants him successful intercourse as well as successful political partisanship in the occupied Czechoslovakia. It offers an alternative narrative about the war, a nostalgic rememory that is not defeatist, but that opens ways to recover the collective agency repeatedly destroyed by the German and Soviet occupation. Miloš' transformation is exemplary in showing that there *are* ways to oppose hegemonic discourse and that one *can* battle paralyzing ideological oppression and resume a position of political dissent. Miloš' kamikaze act is a much-needed statement about the survival of a national political struggle in communist Czechoslovakia. His transformation from a

mechanical bystander to a traumatized individual and, finally, to a conscious agent of history is especially relevant in the context of the Soviet invasion of Prague in 1968. The film creates a site for counter-memory to resist official history and offers the only possibility of heroism available in the reality of communist hegemony and Russian occupation: the small acts of random, everyday heroism accessible to those who are willing to face the historical position thrust upon them.

Far from a melodramatic or melancholic kind of remembering, the film uses humor together with subjective memory to send "intelligible clues to the present" (Wang 106). Remembering the history of World War II in subjective and profoundly physical ways (re)opens the door for political action in the hopeless political conditions of the late 1960s. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 made this role especially dear to viewers as they could recognize through the film a parallel between their past and present (German occupation and Soviet occupation) which kept political dissent alive. The film's imaginary work rewrites history in a conscious fashion resisting its determinism and mobilizing the political consciousness towards imagining alternative realities. It allows for thinking outside the established order and the constraints of historical "necessity" (Bakhtin 49) by offering new possibilities of heroism and resistance.

Other Examples of Nostalgia in the Eastern European Comedy

The comic reinterpretation of the past is an important trait of Eastern European cinema.[18] It dissolves the clash between official history and cultural memory to the

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[18] Other examples that I have no place to discuss here include: *The Snowdrop Festival* (*Slavnosti sněženek*, Jiří Menzel, 1983), *My Sweet Little Village* (*Vesničko má, středisková*, Jiří Menzel, 1985), *Scenes from the Life of Shock Workers* (*Slike is zivota udarnika*, Bato Čengić, 1972), *Giuseppe in Warsaw* (*Giuseppe w Warszawie*, Stanisław Lenartowicz, 1964), *How I Unleashed*

advantage of the latter. The following discussion will illustrate further instances where film comedies from the communist era celebrated subjective memory as an alternative to established narratives of history. Produced for television and broadcast for decades, *Choo Choo Train* (*Indul a Bakterház*, Sándor Mihályfy, 1979) is a Hungarian film loved by many generations. Its main hero, a young shepherd boy called Bendegúz (Imre Olvasztó), whose name recalls the devil in Hungarian, narrates his life in rural Hungary at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The child of a poor family, Bendegúz is sent to work at the house of the railway stationmaster. He presents himself as resourceful, shrewd and vengeful—cleverer than the grown-ups around him. His goal is to survive the hardships of servitude and poverty and to take revenge on the horse merchant who swindled him and on the stationmaster's abusive mother-in-law who abuses him. Bendegúz, whose figure is rooted in the folk tradition of tricksters (like Lúdas Matyi), endures his misfortunes through trickery and humor. His subjective point of view completely defines how we see the unfolding events. He survives by turning the world around into a gay fantasy of monsters and adventures. Through Bendegúz's imagination, the distresses and hardships of dearth and maltreatment become an endless, amusing challenge. The apocalyptic ending shows the whole world falling apart including the stationmaster's house after a long night of drinking and fighting. In the chaos and destruction, Bendegúz keeps his head straight, takes advantage of every opportunity to prosper, and finally he leaves the crumbling world behind in search of a better future.

World War II Part 1-3 (*Jak rozpętałem II wojnę światową* 1-3. Tadeusz Chmielewski, 1969), and *The Corporal and the Others* (*A tizedes meg a többiek,* Márton Keleti, 1965).

The rich and naïve imagination of childhood and the not yet corrupted sense of justice make Bendegúz a true folkloric hero. Like Minarik, he also compensates through his imagination for limited material resources. Bendegúz's fantasy, Minarik's love for football, and Miloš' sexual desires share something in common: they all serve as weapons against the constraining reality that surrounds the heroes and therefore empower them. The world that Bendegúz navigates is complicated, tricky, and often unjust. It is characterized by poverty and deprivation (the soup is cooked with shoe laces and roaches, there is never enough food to eat, the pay is very little). But Bendegúz overcomes all hurdles by skewing reality into a continuous adventure and a fairy tale where rules need to be bent in order to succeed. Upon finding a wallet on the road, for instance, he has no intention of returning it to the owner; instead, he hopes that the treasure will make him rich, a hope he soon finds dashed. He regularly steals food and milk and blames it on the dog. He is also happy to let the stationmaster's cows graze on other peasants' fields.

Choo Choo Train exemplifies how humor and subjective memory override history: in this case, through a child's perspective who sees the world full of monstrous creatures, devil-like enemies, and witchcraft. The world is presented as a mixture of a child's subjective projections and the dismal reality of rural Hungary at the turn of the century. It is a seamless mixture of reality and fantasy. Bendegúz's memories transform reality into a fantasy world where the ruling chaos and dismal deprivation turn into a fun game. The continuous extradigetic commentary looks back at the past from the point of view of a mischievous and naïve child and interprets it in a comic way. He sees the world as populated by ghosts, devils, and surreal appearances. While the child's fantasy

discovers “dragons” to fight and kill, his integrity and simple logic remain undamaged in the utterly corrupt world that surrounds him.

When his mother asks him to behave himself while away, his answer is that “it’s hard to behave in the countryside.” Bendegúz’s words suggest that he is perfectly aware of the limitation of his surroundings. He capitalizes on every opportunity to make fun of his greatest enemy, the stationmaster’s “witch” mother-in-law who cuts his food portions. His agency is primarily linguistic: he fabricates stories as part of his trickery, makes up shameless lies to revenge himself and uses language wittily to retort and mock the grown-ups. For instance, he addresses the mother-in-law using the casual “you” because, as he declares, he is a “fan of equality.” He also promises to reform the world when he becomes a minister: the first action he will take is to make the slapping of children illegal. Although it is clear that Bendegúz’s ideas will not be implemented and reality will continue to be unjust, his declarations are crucial because they measure the dismal reality against a child’s idealism. Bendegúz’s youthful spirit and tireless determination make demands on the twisted reality around him.

The cinematic materialization of subjective memory transforms the painful experiences of childhood into a fairytale-like adventure. Bendegúz’s subjective memory plays a strategic role in building a semi-fictional existence that builds hope from an utterly miserable reality. Similarly to other films such as *Sound Eroticism* (*Egészséges erotika*, Péter Tímár, 1985) and *The Firemen’s Ball*, the film ends on an apocalyptic note with the world literally crumbling down. But Bendegúz walks away joyfully from the disarray and ironically observes that the looming World War was just a “mosquito bite” compared to these “terrible times.” His childhood ordeal comically overrides the tragedy

of World War I and such overall positive attitude about the future turns history on its head.

The film, through Bendegúz's point of view, gives priority to the details of everyday, mundane existence and fantasy over history. The comic celebration of the lower bodily stratum (food, sexuality) reduces history to its most material and vulgar aspects. The subjective and comic filtering of memory in Eastern European cinema desecrated the obviously skewed Grand Narratives of History during communism by offering a much more appealing alternative that spoke to people's everyday life. Through the comic hero and his mundane existence, the contradictions between official communist history and private individual memories could be resolved in favor of the latter.

Conclusions

The very nature of cinema—its codes, conventions, and indexicality—makes it a significant site of *bodily social memory* (Radstone 81), but one that is not ritualistic. The comic element in Eastern European cinema performs an act of "anti-rite" (Mary Douglas) that undermines the official political rituals of remembrance while it offers alternative channels for collective commemoration. It pulls the past open for reexamination and deploys memory against the pressures of totalizing communist historiography. *Old Time Football* and *Closely Watches Trains* mobilized the imagination and the lower bodily stratum to undermine the high aspirations of official history. They re-imagine the past in radical and comic ways in order to liberate the conscience from the constraints of official history. Instead of high utopian ideology, the films emphasize the mundane aspects of everyday life (such as eating, playing football, going to the cinema, and engaging in

sexual pleasure) and show how subjective memory can become political weapons if held right.

By reconfiguring the traumatic past in grotesque (bodily, material) and nostalgic terms the comedies challenge official forms of memory. They indicate that history under communism was far from being homogeneous and uncontested. The grotesque form of memory revisits traumatic events in Eastern Europe's twentieth century, but it emphasizes bodily pleasure, survival, and resistance instead of oppression and determinism. Re-imagining the often-painful past in humorous terms helped to generate collective counter-memories. The films' comic form provided a camouflage necessary since all instances of counter-memory were aggressively censored and by the communist state.

The films discussed in this chapter raise interesting questions regarding how communist societies remembered and how cultural memory participated in "creating and developing discourses—state socialist discourse, resistance discourse, discourse of intellectual responsibility, nationalist discourse—that compete to shape or take over the 'regime of (memory-) truth'" (Esbenshade 87). Although communist reality at any given moment was presented as a "one-piece, serious, unconditional, and indisputable necessity" (Bakhtin 49), the films disclosed that, historically speaking, this "necessity" was relative and highly variable. When *Old Time Football* and *Closely Watches Trains* present radically altered versions of history, they challenge the illusion about communism's "indisputable necessity" upheld above all by official historical narratives. They achieve this through a kind of memory that focuses on the mundane and the bodily. The insistence on the everyday, material aspects of life filtered through subjective

imagination vulgarizes official history's totalizing tendencies. Moreover, through their comic elements the films carnivalize history, turn it on its head and divest it from its absolute seriousness. Comic heroes like Minarik, Miloš, and Bendegúz through their non-serious memories of everyday life embody a special kind of "historical consciousness that critiques the ingrained historical narrative via memory" (Wang 3).

By exposing the void between the communist ordering of the world and lived reality, Eastern European comedies work as a cultural imprint of the common perception of communist reality as absurd and grotesque. Political humor for the most part was orally transmitted during communism and left only a few physical traces in the new, neoliberal capitalist Eastern Europe. Moreover, cinema was amongst the very few cultural objects that Eastern Europeans could hang onto in order to talk about the past as well as the present in a way that diverged from official narratives. Ultimately, the films "cut through the dreamy, triumphant façade of the visual regime and get immersed in an unflinching confrontation with the abysmal real" (Wang 243). They unveil an essential marker of communist "public li(f)e" (Boym 1995: 149), namely the violent overriding of reality through ideology regarding the past *as well as* the present. Svetlana Boym's pun about "public li(f)e" in Eastern Europe encapsulates the core argument of this dissertation: that an incongruence between material reality and the ideological apparatus emerged under communism that resulted in a paradoxical state of doublethink.

Chapter 3

The Grotesque Hero in the Eastern European Imaginary

"*Szólitsd, mint méla boruszáj*
A szorgalmas szegényeket
Rágd a szivükbe, nem muszáj
Hősnek lenni ha nem lehet."[19]
József Attila

The previous chapter discussed how Eastern European cinema has often politicized cultural memory to resist official rituals of remembering. The nostalgic and comic revision of the past played an important role in the communist "politics of memory"—in the battle between the regime's legitimization through history and alternative channels of collective memory. The second part of the dissertation will examine closer the "politics of the body" as we can read it through grotesque comedy. The grotesque bestows a special role on the body as a weapon of political resistance. The body in the carnival world, in a post-Foucauldian understanding, is part of a radical biopolitics, something similar to what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* call "biopotenza." This means that the carnivalesque element in the films focuses on the biological aspects of life in a way that upsets the communist state's biopolitics. In other words, in its carnivalesque representations, the body is thrust against the engines of domination and power. In what follows, I will analyze two specific aspects of such "biopotenza" in Eastern European cinema. This chapter reveals a paradigmatic change

[19] "Call them, open their eyes wide/Those hard working and penniless/Warn them, 'no need' - cry out/For heroism that's headless" (Attila József) [my translation]. This quote by the famous socialist Hungarian poet Attila József appears as the foreword of Péter Bacsó's cult film from 1969, *The Witness* to be discussed in this chapter.

towards a new kind of heroism in Eastern European culture. The grotesque hero's fundamental physical and material attribute challenges the disembodied images of the communist hero and serves as an alternative behavioral model for the collective. Last but not least, chapter four will focus on the female body as a tool to fulfill the masculine subject's desire to revolt against oppression and injustice.

Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the fifteenth century Rabelaisian carnival might seem to differ radically from historical developments in Eastern Europe during the twentieth century. But, even if we forget for a moment about the relevance of Bakhin's text to the 1930s Soviet reality, the two distinct historical moments share some fundamental characteristics. Bakhtin understands the carnival as part of a "two-world condition" (6) in which hierarchical relationships and prohibitions are temporarily suspended, and the official forms of ideology give way to subversive, liberating laughter and transgression. He assumes that the upside-down world with its clowns and idiots is temporary and creates space for another, better, more rational world. The grotesque carnival therefore is crucial for the world's "becoming and renewal" (435) and it retained this role in Eastern European cinema as well.

The roots of the Eastern European grotesque hero are indeed to be found in a particular moment of historical change. It was in the aftermath of the "Great War" when, upon Karel Kosík's account, "the great humor [...] of the modern age was born" (98). The contradictions in the postwar world described by Kosík as simultaneously comic and tragic, elevated and low, victorious and trouncing (98) found a fictional reflection in the grotesque that permeated the cultural tone of the era. In the midst of the postwar political and economic crisis, the different regions of the ailing Austro-Hungarian Empire shared a

particular comic vein in literature. The grotesque and the absurd in Franz Kafka, Jaroslav Hašek, and Józsi Jenő Tersánszky's writings resonated with Eastern European readers because such depictions of a ridiculously twisted world were in dialogue with the general sense of existential insecurity and growing class and ethnic tensions in the interwar period.

Eastern Europeans have spent the last century living in constant ideological experimentation and idiosyncratic political structures that alienated them from the governing institutions. The radically different hegemonic powers all shared one trait: they utilized official culture in overtly propagandistic ways to reorganize and to control reality. Although this dissertation focuses on the communist period, radical changes in political regimes have characterized Eastern European history for over a century now and left a mark on its cultural production. Austro-Hungarian imperialism and feudalism in the aftermath of World War I resulted in severe economic depression, growing nationalism, and a strong attachment to a fascist ideological project that culminated in the tragedy of World War II.

After World War II, and as a result of the Western countries' decision at Yalta, the region was handed over to the Soviet imperialist interest. Gradually, each country was compelled to implement Soviet style socialist political and economic ideology. For good reasons, grotesque comedy became an especially strong representational mode in the communist era—a historical moment that elevated the political and economic contradictions to startling levels. Eastern European societies once again found themselves in reconstruction, transition, and in a state of exception. All attempts to achieve a sustained period of stability and growth were "derailed" (Iván Berend) by the decades of

ongoing political, social, and economic crises that slowly solidified into a permanent existential condition, where instability and irrationality became the very "nature of things."

As we have seen in the previous two chapters, the triumph of communist ideology depended for its success on controlling how people perceived their *present* as well as their *past*. But its triumph was not possible without also generating "docile bodies" (Michel Foucault) that fully embraced and complied with the goal of the communist utopian project. To a greater or lesser degree, communist states were all invested in ordering and organizing individual bodies into a communist collective mass. The state propaganda carefully picked, promoted, and aggressively celebrated the images of the most suitable heroes who embodied the socialist ideal. All spheres of official culture assisted in creating the image of the ideal communist subject: the model worker, the model farmer, the model student, and the model woman. During the carefully orchestrated state rituals people were honored and dishonored, promoted or disgraced depending on their success in living up to their role of "good communists." The masses were choreographed into geometrical and symbolic shapes visualizing the unified socialist utopian subject where the individual disappeared giving him/herself over completely to the collective. Cinema, television, the printed media, and literature all reflected and celebrated such images of the socialist hero.

However, these images did not integrate effortlessly into the collective consciousness. They were commonly perceived as synthetic and inorganic when compared to the reality "on the ground." For instance, the region's institutionalized immorality that grew out of the last one hundred years of history relativized people's

ethical behavior. In the communist era, lying to officials was not considered immoral by the general public and stealing from the state was downright laudable. The black market was thriving while state-owned shops were empty. Counterfeit became part of the planned production strategy in order to report outstanding results even when factory production was declining. The image that the socialist hero perpetuated about the value of hard work, honesty, and moral strength did not resonate with the options that people faced in their everyday lives. Popular culture often reacted to the contradiction between the image of the communist hero proposed by the state and the real parameters of communist life in a critical way by emphasizing alternative possibilities of heroism.

A new heroic model became prevalent in the communist era whose radical *practicality* ultimately helped to confront the decades of irrationality, incomprehensibility, and futility that characterized Eastern Europeans' encounter with history. The obvious disarticulation of the body from the ideological regime produced the figure of the "grotesque hero" whose behavior was fundamentally non-ethical and was characterized by a radical pragmatism that could cope with the moral travesties of the communist world. Fools and crooks, "the accredited representatives of the carnival spirit" (Bakhtin 8) appeared as central figures in many films shifting the paradigm of the communist romantic hero into new directions. The world in which these characters moved was one where the lower bodily stratum dominated, where amorality thrived, and where the discursive superstructure was detached from the material base. The grotesque hero focused on staying safe, getting by, and enjoying small pleasures in a world full of danger and deprivation.

Grotesque heroism appealed to the collective imagination because it provided a viable behavioral model that matched the moral and practical constraints of life under communism. The grotesque hero went further than just legitimizing amoral behavior; he/she presented such conduct not only as acceptable but also as laudable in the particular parameters of Eastern European communist reality. Ultimately, this radical interpretation of heroism reinforced the idea that ethical and moral values were relative and historically determined. The analyses in this chapter will examine the particular grotesque re-imagination of the "mythical hero" that defined much of the region's literary and cinematic production during communism and before.

Švejk—the prototype of the grotesque hero

An important early model of Eastern European grotesque heroism is the protagonist of Jaroslav Hašek's novel, *The Good Soldier Švejk and His Fortunes in the World War* (1928). Švejk's grotesque figure has long fascinated critics and fans. Some connect his character to Hašek's peculiar personal history as a soldier in World War I, and point out the links between Hašek, the "bigamist, closet homosexual, chronic alcoholic, disciplined revolutionary, [and] intellectual parasite" (Steiner 26) and his fictional hero. Others insist on a close relationship between Kafka's absurdly tyrannical bureaucratic world and Hašek's. Karek Kosík was amongst the first to sense the absurd and the grotesque as uniquely common traits in both Kafka and Hašek's writing. He argues that the grotesque hero develops an identity in opposition to the "Great Mechanism"—the paradoxically senseless and chaotic force of modernity that organizes people into "regiments, battalions, and order" (83). Milan Kundera adds an important

note to this parallel, underlining a significant difference between Kafka and Hašek's characters in their opposing attitudes towards their grotesque universe. The antithetical nature of Josef K and Švejk's approach to the world is to be found "in the realm where one pole is the identification with power to the point where the victim develops solidarity with his own executioner, and the other pole is the non-acceptance of power through the refusal to take seriously anything at all; which is to say: in the realm between the absolute of the serious—[Josef] K—and the absolute of the non-serious—Švejk" (Kundera 2003: 48-49). The difference between these two attitudes supplies the argument for this chapter: while Josef K. and Švejk face essentially similar hegemonic structures, Švejk's absolute non-seriousness serves as a new "behavioural model" (Steiner 49) for heroism, one that emphasizes survival and agency against Josef K's victimization and sacrifice at the end of *The Trial*.

Critics such as John Snyder ("The Politics" 289) hold that Švejk's heroism is similar in nature to Don Quixote's, who attempts to conquer all evil in the world. Indeed, even at first glance, there are similarities between the two figures: they both behave erratically according to vague inner urges; their actions are irrational; they often enter into conflict with their surroundings; they endanger themselves and those who surround them; and they are both unaware of the consequences of their actions. Ultimately, both Švejk and Don Quixote move outside the common logic of heroism. They are neither smart, nor strong, and they fail to accomplish conventional "heroic deeds" such as saving the weak or the endangered. In fact, they perpetuate their problems and need miracles to survive the havoc they create. Švejkism thus can be related to *quixotism* in that it denotes

an absurd, “subnormal” behavior suited for the completely senseless, degraded world, and his craziness is in response to the absurdity of the world surrounding him.

Yet, I also question the seemingly obvious transparency of this comparison in the same vein as Peter Stern does when he claims that “the connection between the two novels, taken for granted by many critics, is far from obvious” (104). Don Quixote is a knight with a noble background, who represented and fought for the values of chivalry as they were disappearing in sixteenth and seventeenth century Spain. Švejk, however, comes from a peasant-proletarian popular culture typical to the slowly modernizing Czech regions in Austria-Hungary at the turn of the 19th century. True enough, both heroes are products of their milieu. But while Don Quixote’s politics are nostalgic and purely fictional—he tries to imitate the books that he reads in order to restore the vanishing world of chivalry—Švejk’s politics derive from popular pragmatism. Don Quixote’s character is full of *pathos*, which wins the readers’ sympathy. Švejk is more accurately characterized as *pathetic*. He evokes laughter in the readers. Although clearly fictional, Švejk, unlike Don Quixote, is not interested in fiction or questions of morality; instead, Švejk emphasizes the truth-value of his narratives and his acts are driven by his immediate, material needs.

Don Quixote can be described as a hero *by choice* because he believes in his own agency and is driven by “abstract and deadened idealism” as well as “high ideology” (Bakhtin 22). Švejk, on the other hand, is thoroughly skeptical of idealism and of ideological illusions. He can be compared more accurately to Sancho Panza, the clownish servant, the embodiment of the “absolute lower level of grotesque realism” (Bakhtin 22) and materialism. Since they see reality as (pre)determined, both Sancho and Švejk’s goal

is to survive and to scrape out a living. They are heroes not by choice but *by necessity*. Švejk's figure aligns with the trickster tradition, the Sancho Panza-like "kynic heroes" (Steiner 37) who "linger on the margins of an unfriendly society" (Snyder, "The Politics" 43), and who are much less idealistic and much more practical than their conventional counterparts since their mission is to get by in a irrational world. Peter Sloterdijk defines Švejk's "kynicism" as a "plebeian rejection to the official culture by means of irony and sarcasm" (quoted in Žižek 1989: 29). This description fits perfectly my understanding of Švejkian heroism as a cultural reaction to the institutionalized imperial oppression. But Švejk, unlike Sancho Panza, is not a sidekick, the comic relief in the story. He stands in the center of the narrative as a cultural legitimization of a specific behavioral model that leaves behind ingenuousness, physical strength, and moral righteousness and turns to astute pragmatism and practicality as genuine forms of heroism.

Švejk lends his name to *švejkism* or *švejking* suggesting that his figure extends beyond a simple fictional character. Literary interpretations regard the "geniálíní idiot" (Gutt-Rutter 6)[20] as more than just a popular image in Czech literature. He is a "paradigmatic figure" (Hanáková 153), part of a long tradition of folk heroes (such as the Czech Hloupý Honza or the Hungarian Ludas Matyi) who use their cunning cleverness, shrewdness, and slyness to outsmart the (aristocratic) enemy. Švejkism denotes a behavioral model in the Eastern European popular imaginary, a collective response to chronic historical traumas. Many critics, like Petra Hanáková describe švejkism in derogatory terms, as "anti-heroic heroism" meaning that this behavior is self-deprecating and counter-productive in its "impassability, inefficiency, and lack of hope" (159).

[20] See Gutt-Rutter's endnotes for an extensive list of references discussing Švejk as "geniálíní idiot."

Contrary to these negative statements, I see Švejk's "main urge for self-preservation" (Hanáková 157) as truly heroic as it recognizes the only option available to the individual in a godforsaken, hostile world. His figure is a cultural icon around which the comic representations of the region's ongoing historical crises can be untangled.

Švejk's inverted behavior holds a mirror up to the perverted reality that Hašek perceived as the normal state of things in war-torn Austria-Hungary. He considers himself to be the only one left to "get the Monarchy out of the mess" (Švejk 55), and as such, he connects himself organically to the history of World War I. The not so pleasant "idylls" that propel his adventures forward echo the dreadfulness of the war. Being "much too political" (100), as Švejk declares himself to be, is a consequence of this close encounter with history. His fate is completely subjugated to the unpredictable events of the war and to the chaos that rules the empire's governing institutions. Švejk enjoys life as best as he can while trying to avoid being "run through with a bayonet" (153) and to survive in the various prisons and mental hospitals. He faces his existential uncertainty with ironic enthusiasm and does not despair when his commanding officers gamble him away, when they send him to the front, or even when he is momentarily condemned to death. Instead, our hero takes advantage of the administrative corruption and disorganization whenever he can to secure his own wellbeing. Such ludicrous behavior is miraculously successful when dealing with the ridiculously dysfunctional institutions of the empire.

The "comic aspect of survivalism" (Žižek 2001: 83) is very much part of Švejkian practicality and so is calculated stupidity. Švejk's mischievousness is accompanied by the physical and verbal display of complete idiotic innocence. When the furious and

desperate lieutenant Lukáš says to Švejk "Jesus Mary, Himmelherrgott, I'll have you shot you bastard, you cattle, you oaf, you pig. Are you really such a half-wit?" he readily answers: "Humbly report, sir, I am" (209). Further, "the kindly innocent eyes of Švejk continued to glow with gentleness and tenderness, combined with an expression of complete composure; everything was in order and nothing had happened, and if something had happened, it was again quite in order that anything at all was happening" (209). Such expressions of idiocy are very characteristic to Švejk. His practicality is infused with a functional imbecility that liberates him from social constraints and that helps him survive in a fundamentally unpredictable and absurdly dysfunctional world. Švejk's "defensive use of mental dimness" (Petkovic 386) is a manifestation of his skepticism towards all military institutions, officials, and state bureaucracy.

Švejk's eager participation in the war in order to serve "His Imperial Majesty" stands in stark opposition to any logical judgment. His (mis)interpretations of official orders or the enthusiasm, with which he executes them *wrongly,* are veiled forms of civil disobedience resulting in severe consequences for both him and his superiors. When sent to the front as a punishment for his misconduct, he is "awfully happy" to go and brags that "[i]t'll be really marvelous when we both fall dead together for His Imperial Majesty and the Royal Family" (213). His foolish determination prompts Švejk to go against all common sense, and his "guerilla acts" undermine the seriousness of the Austrian military endeavor itself. Through his particular perspective, the image of the "Great Empire" turns into an obvious political anomaly.

In the military hospital, when he is accused of malingering and punished with daily enemas, Švejk takes his treatment/punishment very seriously. He tells the doctor,

> "Don't spare me," he invited the myrmidon who was giving him the enema. "Remember your oath. Even if it was your father or your own brother who was lying here, give him an enema without batting an eyelid. Try hard to think that Austria rests on these enemas and victory is ours." (69)

Švejk's irrational insistence on the doctor's thoroughness and his dedicated participation in the medical procedure betrays an ironic commitment to Austria's cause. His enthusiasm over the enemas, like his absurd eagerness to help out the empire is a thinly veiled "degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract" (Bakhtin 19). The moral topography of patriotic heroism is turned upside down in this gesture. Through Švejk's imbecility "the soul's beatitude," so important for classical heroism, is "deeply immersed in the body's lowest stratum" (378). The detailed descriptions of the lower bodily functions (such as defecating and anal treatment) are carnivalesque subversions of the highest political strata: they undermine the sacred Empire and its ongoing "holy war."

In order to endure the general condition of deprivation, the Švejkian hero's primary goal is to satisfy his basic physical needs. Unsurprisingly, he concentrates his energies on such bodily functions as eating, drinking, urinating, and defecating. Consumption is a "mighty aspiration" (Bakhtin 280) for Švejk, and so he is eager to take advantage of every occasion when food or drink is served. An example of such eagerness is the famous scene where Švejk receives a visit in the hospital from a baroness. Having heard about his heroic decision to join the army voluntarily, the baroness brings him a box full of cigarettes, food, and drink.

> Before Dr. Grunstein could return from below, where he had gone to see the baroness out, Švejk had distributed the chickens. They were bolted by the patients so quickly that Dr. Grunstein found only a heap of bones

> gnawed cleanly, as though the chickens had fallen alive into a nest of vultures and the sun had been beating down on their gnawed bones for several months. The war liqueur and the three bottles of wine had also disappeared. The packets of chocolate and the box of biscuits were likewise lost in the patients' stomachs. Someone even drunk up the bottle of nail polish which was in the manicure set and ate the toothpaste which had been enclosed with the toothbrush. (73)

The doctor's strategy was to keep the hospitalized soldiers away from decent food and to make the hospital a worse place than the front itself in order to force them back to the battlefield. In this scene, food is presented as a tool of institutional control, but also as an important battleground between the state and the individual. The encounter between the monarchy and Švejk takes place over his body where it seeks to control his basic bodily functions. However, the grotesque hero's body overflows the constraints of the system and cannot be easily coerced. In fact being able to provide a "banquet for all the world" (Bakhtin 278) means a vital victory for Švejk over the state's coercive regulation. The "greedy body" (292) that drinks even the nail polish and relinquishes itself to any available abundance, ultimately overflows and defeats such disciplinary institutions as the military hospital.

The interest in the material and bodily sphere that is so characteristic to the grotesque serves the purpose of self-preservation and self-empowerment at the same time. Bodily pleasures are vital for Švejk's continuing quest in his desperate circumstances because they provide physical opposition to the overly oppressive hegemonic control. The grotesque hero's behavior adapts very well to the unruly, chaotic world. When, for instance, two soldiers escort Švejk from prison to the chaplain's house they intoxicate themselves along the way. Švejk, who is drunk himself has to carry his guards with "superhuman efforts and struggles" (105) to their destination. The scene

reveals the military personnel's utter incompetence and corruptibility, but also more generally, the upside down world of the monarchy (where the prisoner has carry his own guards). When universal and uncontrollable drinking is the norm and the authorities lack any (self-) discipline, Švejk's priorities are to adapt to it as well as possible in order to get by.

Relieving himself healthily carries the same importance for the Švejkian hero as putting food and drink into his body. Švejk takes great pleasure in describing his bowel and kidney movements and offers precise details in his accounts. For instance, one of his "most affectionate memories" (95) come from the night that he spent in the garrison where "the bad food made the digestive process difficult for everyone, and the majority suffered from wind, which they released into the stillness of the night" (95). Here he heard one of the most entertaining stories about a fellow who "was such a gent that he didn't even want to sit on the bucket and waited until the next day for the exercise hour so that he could do it in the latrine in the courtyard. He was so spoiled that he even brought his own toilet paper" (96). Švejk's passionate interest in bowel and kidney movements in the military purposefully vulgarizes the holiness of the imperial project. The lower bodily stratum, a key part of the grotesque hero's bodily materialism, once again undermines the noble aspirations of the war.

Švejk is often nostalgic for the times before the war when he made a living by collecting stray-dogs from the streets. He fondly remembers how he created fake pedigrees and resold the stray-dogs as purebreds. The "business" operation that Švejk conducted before the war—making something out of nothing at the risk of violating the law—was the most effective way to secure the minimal stability that would ensue his

survival. At some point in the novel, he claims that the most challenging part of his job was to convince the patrons not only that a dog had a pedigree, but also that the customer was best off with the particular breed that Švejk happened to have in stock. On one occasion, he complains, he "had to spend from four o'clock in the afternoon to seven o'clock in the evening talking that lady into buying that blind bulldog instead of a parrot" (174). The ability to come up with clever schemes like this was crucial for the Švejkian hero's triumphant endurance in the bizarre reality of the war. Raising any moral objections to this conduct would miss the point: for the Švejkian hero only efficiency matters. "Doing things properly" from the point of view of the pragmatic hero does not entail following the law or obeying moral principles. It simply means achieving what is desired at any price—a job properly done is one that is completed.

The grotesque hero does not read between the lines as he is supposed to, which is a satirical strategy that discloses an important aspect characteristic of his world: namely, that it thrives on multiple signification, double meanings, and rhetorical deception. For instance, when the very drunk chaplain asks Švejk to punch him, "Švejk immediately obliged him" (113). On another occasion, when the doctor asks him if he "occasionally [felt] run down by any chance" (27) Švejk hesitantly responds that he "was once nearly run down by a car on Charles Square but that was years ago" (27). The transparent reading of language disregards the double-entendre characterizing the discourse of the military officials. By interpreting language literally, the Švejkian hero ultimately goes against the doublethink— the simultaneous acceptance of official language and the awareness that it does not correspond to material reality. His blindness to the intricacies

and metaphors of official language reduces its confusing, multilayered signification process into a single dimension.

Švejk builds a web of parables that extends as a safety net over his world. The abundance of stories brings authenticity to his actions, and at the same time it also conveys that his reality has been transpired by fiction. Švejk has a tale to tell about every topic. The stories are sometimes short and to the point but mostly they are lengthy and intricate, and Švejk, to the great annoyance of others, insists on telling them all the way to the end. When, for instance, he is transferred from the chaplain to lieutenant Lukáš, he readily admits to being a "frightful idiot" (168) and in order to demonstrate the veracity of his statement he tells the story of his last discharge from the army.

> When I was serving as a regular I got a complete discharge for idiocy and for patent idiocy into the bargain. In our regiment only two of us were discharged this way, me and a Captain von Kaunitz. And whenever that captain went out in the street, if you pardon me sir, he always at the same time picked his left nostril with his left hand, and his right nostril with his right hand, and when he went with us to the parade ground he always made us adopt a formation as though it was going to be a march past and said: "Men, ahem, remember, ahem, that today is Wednesday because tomorrow will be Thursday, ahem." (168)

Švejk's storytelling, as we can see, is often convoluted, fragmented, and excessive. Although always funny, the stories are far from simple entertainment: his preposterous tales match the ludicrousness of the Austro-Hungarian military and the chaos of the war in the Czech provinces. His overflowing utterances and simplified interpretations both mock the absurd disarticulation of official language from reality in the vanishing imperial order.

Ultimately, Švejk represents a "popular corrective laughter applied to the narrow-minded seriousness of spiritual pretense [Don Quixote/idealism/official culture]"

(Bakhtin 22) and an "overwhelming adaptability to inhospitable circumstances" (Steiner 44). His appeal lies in his imbecility, shrewdness, enigmatic quality, and unpredictability. Readers identify with this radical hero because he does not allow himself to be shoved around in a world that is "a horrible and senseless labyrinth, a world of powerless people caught in the net of bureaucratic machinery and material gadgets" (Kosík 85-86).

Grotesque Heroism in Eastern European Cinema

The grotesque hero has a unique relation to his contemporary reality. His radical behavior legitimizes otherwise unimaginable ways to cope with the world perceived as absurd. His actions ultimately "touch and test every object, examine it from all sides, enter into it, turn it inside out, compare it to every phenomenon, however exalted and holy, analyze, weigh, measure, and try it on" (Bakhtin 381). By doing so, the grotesque hero "draw[s] the world closer to man" (ibid.) and demonstrates a direct bodily involvement in order to "destroy and suspend all alienation" (ibid.).

Švejk's very distinctive "pragmatic shell" (Hanáková 153), that is to say, his practicality, emerges as a radical model for heroism not only in the interwar period but also during the turbulent historical events of the 1960s. In what follows, I shall compare Hašek's novel to two Hungarian films, *The Corporal and the Others* (*A tizedes meg a többiek*, Márton Keleti, 1965) and *The Witness* (*A tanú*, Péter Bacsó, 1969) and shall look at how švejkism continued to function as an imaginary reaction to existential turmoil in 1960s Eastern Europe. The analysis will look at three particular aspects described earlier as definitive of grotesque heroism in Eastern European culture: the purposeful use of mental dimness in order to survive, the monophonic interest in satisfying immediate

bodily needs, and finally, the total disregard for moral or ethical codes. Furthermore, I will also address the question of how the grotesque hero's use of language redefines the relationship between fiction and reality in communist Eastern Europe.

Coping with historical torrents is the theme of the Hungarian cult classic from 1965, *The Corporal and Others* (dir. Márton Keleti). This movie presents Hungary's military chaos at the end of World War II. Imre Dobozy's original script had a serious, melodramatic tone that attempted to fill the vacuum in Hungarian cinema in the genre of partisan films about World War II and the Soviet liberation of Hungary. But Márton Keleti's adaptation turned the story into a comedy—the first comedy about the war in post-1945 Hungary. The main character, Corporal Molnár (Imre Sinkovits), after three years on the frontlines, decides to desert and to never return to the battlefield. With a grenade necklace around his neck, in which he also carries the monetary funds of the whole regiment, he overtakes an empty castle guarded only by an old footman, Albert (Tamás Major). Soon he finds out that the castle is full of renegades like himself, so he decides to take command in order to save himself and the others from a fatal discovery by either the Hungarian, the Russian, or the German armies.

In the case of Švejk, readers and critics still wonder whether he is really quite as stupid as he seems to be or if he only acts that way (the impossibility to decide this is one of the novel's main merits). Molnár's naïveté differs by nature. He is cunning and sharp, a true strategist and an experienced soldier who is well aware of his surroundings. Molnár's shrewdness is clear from the beginning when he refuses to return to the battlefield after his regiment was destroyed in Budapest. He lies and disobeys orders

without hesitation in order to stay away from the front. But he often *masquerades* as an idiot to avoid persecution. As the Hungarian critic Tibor Hirsch correctly observes,

> The corporal, a true survivor—like an emblematic figure from the Kádár era,[21]—at the very end decides to join the ad hoc partisan commando helping the Russians, but the contemporary audiences easily forgive this obviously artificial face-lift of the character: as otherwise it resembles so much their own ideal, since the Hungarians in the middle of the 60s turned the simple survivor into a model, and Hungarian cinema popularizes such survivors without specially ordered political campaigns. [my translation]

For Molnár, there is no difference between the Hungarian army, the Arrowcross troops,[22] the Germans, or the Russians. Each military force poses an equal threat to him and his comrades. His goal in the twisted "game" is to skillfully navigate among the different threats in the chaotic turmoil of the war. The trouble of doing so is the main source of humor in the film. The unbearable circumstances on the battlefield (left to the imagination of the viewer) push Molnár to adopt a new, Švejkian strategy, which could be perceived as cowardice. But the film posits Molnár's behavior as the only sensible response to the military chaos surrounding him. His sharp mind, tactical brilliance, and highly practical thinking are virtues that help him adjust to constantly varying circumstances.

One of Corporal Molnár's strategies in order to avoid discovery is to act with unassuming docility and obedience in front of the authorities. Although eager to reveal

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[21] János Kádár played an important role in the suppression of the 1956 revolution in Hungary and took leadership of the country the same year. He stayed in power until 1988 when the democratization and liberalization of the country became inevitable. The Kádár-era was characterized by heavy Soviet influence (and military presence), but also by political and economic compromises and relatively high living standards. Kádár's governing principles were "consolidation" and "compromise."

[22] Arrowcross is the English translation of the name of the Hungarian fascist military fraction of the Nyilaskeresztes Párt—Hungarista Mozgalom ('Arrowcross Party—Hungarianist Movement'), a pro-German, anti-Semitic fascist party that ruled the country between October 1944 and January 1945.

his disrespect for and hatred towards the military superiors when they are not present, Molnár never resists authority explicitly; he pretends to subject himself to any army that crosses his way. For instance, when caught by Arrowcross soldiers, he humbly reports that he has lost his battalion, and is now looking for orientation and new orders. He adds a touch of extra authenticity with an enthusiastic hail, "Kitartás! Éljen Szálasi!"[23]—the Hungarian fascist greeting. He uses the same passion to convince the Russians about his partisan past and to describe to the Hungarian officer his desperation over losing his squad. Molnár's automatic subjugation to the abrupt changes in power discloses the pressures that the individual had to face in overpowering historical conditions. His mask of idiocy proves an important point: that mental dimness is a strategic part of pragmatic heroism. Whether authentic or not, this clowning brings to light the grotesque hero's main goal: to survive in the chaos. Such Švejk-like practicality is heroic in that it focuses on endurance instead of sacrifice.

Food and drink also play a critical role in Molnár's struggle to outlive the turmoil of the war. On one occasion, he and another soldier save a group of men from being forcefully drafted by the Arrowcross army. When the wives and daughters bestow their blessings on them, Molnár impatiently replies: "We can't live on blessings. Do you have anything to eat?" Traditional gestures of grandeur are meaningless for him; he measures success by bodily satisfaction only. His main source of happiness is a "treasure box" full of bread and sausage that he never leaves out of reach. Consequently, he sees no moral problem with paying a "visit" to the local hunter and his family who have recently slaughtered a pig. In the hunter's house they encounter a German officer who is literally

[23] The hail can be translated as "Persistence! Hail Szálasi!" with a reference to Ferenc Szálasi, founder of the fascist Arrowcross Party, Hungary's prime minister as well as head of state at the end the war from 1944 to April 1945.

obsessed with eating. Although his soldiers report that the "Russians are already in the pantry,"[24] he refuses to leave until he has finished dessert. Later, to the great delight of the gluttonous German officer, the army dogs discover a hastily hidden dinner in Molnár's castle. The officer promptly demands "baking soda" to help his digestion and advises his footman to call the doctor if necessary. The pathologically obsessive German officer with a strong Hungarian accent (memorably played by the famous actor, László Márkus) is a great source of grotesque comedy in the film. His appetite is an ironic symbol of the endless imperial hunger of Nazi Germany.

Corporal Molnár is ready to do whatever it takes to keep himself and his comrades safe from the three different, equally hostile armies. No moral code or ethical dilemma will stop him from his objective to stay alive in the military chaos. He hides his regiment's allowance in order to invest it after the war. Molnár blatantly lies about his identity when caught, and in order to confuse the enemies, he masterfully impersonates different characters including the aristocratic owner of the castle, a fascist sympathizer, and a communist partisan. He also produces several fake letters of delegation to legitimize himself in front of the military authorities. All in all, the corporal's sense of right is exclusively determined by his objective to outlive the war and to stay away from the combat zone. No political belief or moral principle can deter him from looking after himself. The question of fighting for the "right reasons" leaves Molnár unmoved even at the very end of the film when his comrades join the Soviet forces. He is critical of all ethical or ideological principles trying to justify the ongoing war. After spending three

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[24] The phrase "The Russians are already in the pantry!" that became famously popular with Hungarian audiences originates from this scene referring to a Soviet soldier hiding in the pantry of the hunter's family.

years on the battleground, there is no good enough moral reason for which he would be willing to endanger his life.

Similarly to Hašek's novel, language and performativity are vital weapons of the grotesque hero in *The Corporal and Others* as well. Molnár and his companions cross-dress, wear masks, and act out dramas to deceive the different military invaders. In effect, they act as a theatre company and use the castle as the stage for their masquerade. For instance, when they think that the Russians have arrived, the runaways form a still life act dressed up as peasants with a Soviet soldier in the middle. Just a few minutes later, when it turns out that in fact they are facing the German army, they quickly change their performance: the corporal now plays the aristocrat owner of the castle to distract the Germans. These acts prove to be lifesavers for the group. They can hide their true faces (tired of and fed up with the war) behind the masks in order to avoid being drawn into the reality of the military disaster in Hungary. The dramas that the corporal invents in the chaotic, unpredictable circumstances function as a shelter that transforms the war itself into a fictional game. The masquerade is successful in deceiving the enemy precisely because the reality of the war is just as grotesque and wide-open to the imagination as is the deserters' masquerade.

The Corporal and Others depicts Molnár's desperate attempts to make it to the shore, in other words, to escape from the tragic historical situation into which he, just like Švejk, was thrust. His heroism lies in the ability to successfully navigate the highly complex and dangerous military order. While repeatedly claiming that he is "in it only for himself only," Molnár also realizes that he cannot survive without his comrades and that his individual interest is inseparable from the group's. His behavior demonstrates a

different kind of wit and braveness from the traditional hero's astuteness. The film replaces the common cinematic depictions of military heroism with an alternative, grotesque heroism that struggles to stay alive and to be safe. *The Corporal and Others* overwrites the heroism of partisan martyrdom so typical in socialist realist cinema by the heroism of survival and endurance; the courage to leave home is replaced with the courage to risk everything in order to return home safely.

Péter Bacsó's Hungarian cult classic, *The Witness* (1969) reconstructs and comments on the hysterical and pathological atmosphere of the infamous show trials in early 1950s' Hungary with great sensitivity to the particular absurdity and brutality that characterized this era. The opening scene shows Pelikán (Ferenc Kállai) the levee-guard scolding his dog for peeing on an inscription that says "Long Live Our Wise Leader!"—a hint as to why the film was immediately withdrawn from circulation and only released ten years later to great domestic popularity and international success. This is how the director, Péter Bacsó remembers the fate of the movie:

> The history of *The Witness'* circulation is also the history of our "slinking reforms." The sectarian political sphere was not powerful enough to discard the film without any trace. [...] First, they showed it as exquisite delicacy, a special treat to exclusively selected Party workers, with the intention to entertain and refresh those tired of participating in the always dry and dogmatic Party conferences. The print of the film was already torn into pieces when they first decided to show it at Bányász Cinema[25] as part of my "directorial retrospective," while later the Tinódi Cinema also decided to play it, although without any publicity or advertising. Due to unexpected luck, the film also got to Cannes, because Aczél[26] had nothing against international circulation. The history of *The Witness* could be a film on its own. Today they play it all over the world, everyone understands it and finds delight in it. (Csepeli 11)

[25] Bányász Cinema translates as Miner Cinema, a center that played an important role in the cinema culture of the 1970s and 1980s' Hungary.
[26] György Aczél was a hugely influential deputy minister of culture between 1957 and 1967, famous for his progressive and soft cultural politics working on principles of "support, tolerance and prohibition."

Pelikán's life is subject to complete unpredictability; random forces in the system throw him back and forth between prison and prestige. His quiet, poor rural idyll is turned upside down when he gets caught in the machinery of the communist bureaucratic labyrinth. He is first arrested when the police find evidence that he slaughtered a pig illegally. Suddenly freed from prison by the secret police officer Virág (Lajos Őze), Pelikán is appointed the director of a state owned swimming pool. In the "steadily intensifying international situation"[27] Virág wants Pelikán to become a true hero of communism. Although he fails miserably, Pelikán is rescued for a second time and made the director of the Amusement Park. Unfortunately, his short-lived career ends in the prison cell again. Finally, he is appointed first man of the Hungarian Orange Research Institute; but he disappoints again. This time Pelikán can only save himself by agreeing to witness against his old friend, Minister Dániel who is on trial for treachery. Virág claims that Pelikán's final chance to redeem himself and his heroic communist image in the "continuously intensifying international situation" is to confess against Dániel. In the very last moment, Pelikán refuses to take the stand of the witness. His confused, simpleminded request to hear a logical explanation and exact accusation in the ongoing trial is a form of quiet resistance that becomes exemplary of a new kind of heroic behavior, the only one possible in the volatile communist reality.

The grotesque world of *The Witness* runs on coincidence and randomness rather than reason. Pelikán's self-declared dumbness, like Švejk's, is part of a pragmatic strategy to survive in this world. His defensive response to political interpellation is

[27] The "international situation is steadily intensifying" was one of Stalin's favorite slogans, but the phrase became especially popular in Hungary after the release of Bacsó's film.

evident in his repeated declarations that he is "ideologically uneducated" and incompetent, quite the opposite of a true socialist hero. Pelikán willingly subjects himself to bureaucratic abuse even to the extent that he initially agrees to witness against his friend, Dániel. This submissiveness resides in a naïve enthusiasm to be of help. During the war, he hid the communist Dániel and his comrades from the Nazi army out of sympathy, and now seeing that Virág is on the verge of committing suicide, he wants to help him as well for the same reason. Pelikán's willingness to cooperate is rooted in his simpleminded and honest nature and also in his past experience. He is well aware that objecting to the random measures of state bureaucracy is futile and that all he can do is humbly ask to be spared and sent back to the levee because he is "a complete idiot."

But Pelikán retains his ideological naïveté when thrown into the political intricacies and refuses to understand or to accept the bureaucratic machinery that he is a victim of. He continuously misreads the complicated web of political signification surrounding him. His simplemindedness goes against the complexity of the ideological discourse waiting to be decoded and acted upon. For example, while waiting for his execution, he assists a prison guard in his homework for a communist training seminar. But he explains phrases like "boycott of the DUMA" as meaning that "everyone has to shut up."[28] Ultimately, this unsophisticated understanding of language prevents Pelikán from comprehending the accusations in the trial and results in his decision not to testify against Minister Dániel. He admits his lack of understanding when it comes to the political machinery behind the trial, but consequently he also demands a simple explanation as to why he should become a false witness against his old friend. The

[28] "DUMA" was a Russian institution that corresponded to the lower house in the parliament, but in Hungarian it means "chitchat."

insistence on logical reasoning imposes an apolitical, uncomplicated, and pragmatic common sense onto the absurdly complicated and illogical communist world. Imbecility, in other words, is a comic tool with which Pelikán unveils the grotesque exaggerations and the paradoxes of communist authoritarianism and state bureaucracy.

Unsurprisingly, Pelikán also keeps up his healthy appetite throughout the film. Although terribly frightened by Comrade Virág, he happily accepts a "small bite" offered by his interrogator. The roast pig on the dinner table is meant to shake Pelikán's sense of guilt (as he was first arrested for illegal pig slaughter), but it does not destroy his appetite—while being questioned, he happily nibbles on the meat. When Virág asks him what he would like to drink, his answer is simple: "anything." Even the poor prison meals offer Pelikán a comforting stability in the volatile political situation. Each time he returns to the cell, his first question is "What is for lunch/dinner?" The answer is always the same—"tarhonya," a kind of cheap and plain pasta dish—but in the monotonous repetition he finds a positive consistency when the world outside is completely unpredictable except for the chronic food shortage. Even when condemned to death, Pelikán finds joy in his last supper, and to the surprise and disappointment of his prison guard, he proceeds to fully and cheerfully consume it. Since his life is in permanent uncertainty, drinking and eating become vital signs of life. Basic bodily functions are crucial in the grotesque because they signal life and indicate that the body is still "kicking." In the unpredictable and upside-down world eating, drinking, urinating, and defecating confirm Pelikán's very existence (to put is simply, "I eat, therefore I am").

The grotesque hero's amorality is his best hope to prevail in an irrational world produced by an overpowering ideology. The communist political regime in *The Witness*

is presented as fundamentally amoral, sometimes even consciously critical of moralizing. Some, like Pelikán, are pushed into moral immunity by exceptionally strenuous circumstances. Others, such as Virág, are active promoters and beneficiaries of the system that thrives on deception and corruption. Although Pelikán tries to do the "right thing," he has no choice but to slaughter a pig illegally in order to feed his family. He is a good citizen as Švejk is a "good soldier," but "goodness" in this case does not entail strict ethical codes. It means that the individual is ready to do whatever it takes to overcome the chaotic conditions. Virág himself is openly skeptical about any attempt of fairness and justice. When he and Pelikán are looking for general Bástya who is on a rabbit hunt, Pelikán expresses his pity for the rabbits (himself a victim similar to them), but Virág cuts him short with a sarcastic warning: "Are you moralizing again?"

Similarly to Švejk, Pelikán falls short of interpreting and reinterpreting commands correctly. During his brief career as the director of a swimming pool, he fails to recognize the unwritten, corrupt "guest policy." He lets the common people into the pool because they have tickets, while he commands general Bástya, who is swimming by himself, to leave the premises since he does not possess a ticket. The straightforward application of the swimming pool rules in an obviously tricky situation lands him back in prison. His second position as the director of the Amusement Park does not bring him any more luck. In the spirit of true socialism, Pelikán proposes to turn the imperialist sounding "English Park" into an "Amusement Park" and the "Ghost Train-Ride" into the "Socialist Ghost Train-Ride."[29] Such playful twisting of denominators mocks the doublespeak, the

[29] "Szellem" in Hungarian means both ghost and soul, so the same expression can be used to express "Socialist Ghost Train-Ride" and "Socialist Soul Train-Ride."

discursive freeplay with which the communist state attempted to achieve the fundamental reorganization of reality.

Pelikán's luck comes to a sudden end again when general Bástya takes the first ceremonial ride in the new cave. He is horrified to see Marx and Lenin's as well as his own picture emerge from the dark. As it turns out, Pelikán left the structure of the train-ride intact and only replaced the "symbols of darkness" (skeletons and monsters) with communist iconography. Pelikán's failure to recognize the duplicity of standards as well as his inability to interpret the multilayered world of communist signification becomes his misfortune. His naïve and literal execution of different directives is due to a simple and transparent understanding of communist reality, or more often, a lack of understanding. If Švejk unmasks the irrationalities of monarchic absolutism by pushing it to the extreme, Pelikán contrasts his own simple(minded) reasoning with the totalitarian irrationality of communism. Through their "satiric literalism" both characters disclose an absurd incongruity between language and material reality.

Marx's words are quoted at the very end of *The Witness*. These words are: "Why such a march of history? This is necessary for mankind to say a *gay* farewell to its past" (Marx and Engels 418, my emphasis).[30] The epilogue to the film points to a gay carnival as the last stage before the revolutionary moment in history. However, within the context of the film, this statement acquires an ironic tone since, for most of Eastern Europe's twentieth century, the "gay farewell" to the past, a true and rejuvenating moment of carnivalesque revolution, proved elusive.

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[30] Which, coincidentally, also closes Bakhtin's book, *Rabelais and His World*.

Švejk's adventures in World War I show his randomly changing masters, and his repeated relocations from the prison to the front and to military hospitals. In a similar vein, Corporal Molnár's encounters with the equally threatening Russian, German, Hungarian, or Arrowcross troops are entirely unpredictable, and Pelikán is also moved haphazardly in and out of jail and in and out of prestige. Their adventures fictionally reproduce the abrupt political turns and ideological experimentations, the deep-rooted despotism and corruption, the alternations between wars and dictatorships, and the experience of extreme changes from feudalism to fascism and to communism. They also embody a growing need in the cultural imaginary for alternative models of heroism, radically different from those offered by the hegemonic powers, which seem to be inadequate and limited. In the constantly shifting ideological extremes and continuous political transitions, the grotesque hero develops a healthy skepticism towards the status quo and values *practicality* as the most important skill to survive the turbulences of history.

Madness in Bakhtin's interpretation is part of the regenerative carnival because it helps "to escape the false 'truth of this world' in order to look at the world with eyes free from this 'truth'" (49). As part of a strategic simplemindedness, the grotesque hero submits himself to the authorities without hesitation. His eagerness to cooperate is based on a self-perception of innocence and also on a sardonic "appreciation" of the Althusserian State Apparatuses (military hospitals, the police, the church, the army). One can be drafted into the army, arrested by the police, tortured in the military hospital against one's will without any power to dispute or resist. Therefore, the grotesque hero chooses a specific tactic of self-defense, namely to go "under the knife" enthusiastically

in order to capitalize on the particular situation and to survive. The grotesque hero's behavior adapts itself perfectly well to the perverse and absurd nature of his world, but it also unmasks its irrationalities. Foolishness is key for the grotesque hero's survival; his idiotic mask makes him the king in the communist charade.

Bakhtin also claims that the "materialistic concept of being" (52) is a key element in the aesthetics of grotesque comedy. Eating is not simply a pleasure for the grotesque hero; it is a way for him to conquer the world. The recurrent images of feasts in medieval grotesque realism show the triumphant openness and gay connectedness of the body to the world. According to Bakhtin, this connection disappeared in the pessimism of the Romantic grotesque. I suggest that when grotesque realism resurfaces again in twentieth century Eastern Europe, the fundamentally materialistic heroic model described by Bakhtin becomes as rebellious as it was in medieval France. Bakhtin's observation that "no meal can be sad" and that "sadness and food are incompatible" (283) rings true for the Eastern European grotesque hero's joyful obsession with eating and drinking. The lower bodily stratum, emphasized in the carnival, is a crucial tool of defiance because it ultimately devours and digests the world together with its painful irrationalities.

Rabelaisian hedonism is undoubtedly related to the practicality of survival. Eating and drinking are gestures through which the grotesque hero consumes the world "instead of being devoured by it" (Bakhtin 285); they are basic means to escape institutional oppression and existential turmoil. When food and drink are luxury items, Švejk, Pelikán, and corporal Molnár turn their attention to eating and drinking as the most basic means of survival and a celebration of small joys in a fundamentally unstable world. The innumerable scenes of gluttony and hedonism in Eastern European grotesque cinema

create a sense of carnival driven by the lower bodily functions. Similar to Rabelais' medieval carnival, the Eastern European grotesque hero's "encounter with the world in the act of eating is joyful, triumphant; he triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured himself" (Bakhtin 281). He "eats away" the surrounding dangers and conquers the world with every warm meal he manages to put his hands on. Eating and drinking are therefore positive, empowering forms of participation in the carnival: through them "the limits between man and the world are erased, to man's advantage" (281).

Bakhtin attributed an especially important role in the carnival to the lower bodily stratum, most particularly defecation and reproduction. But his insightful investigation of the medieval carnival considers only the body and ignores the carnivalesque inversion of moral norms. In the carnival the law is often suspended and the relationship between right and wrong, moral and immoral is reversed. This world shows signs of "downward movement" (Bakhtin 400) in *ethical* terms as well. Amorality is typical to the Eastern European grotesque hero who acts without ethical liability. He has no moral concerns and considers overt dishonesty, scheming, and dubious business dealings not only acceptable but also normal. Švejkian practicality, oblivious to the law, only sees its target in the highly unstable circumstances. For this Eastern European pragmatic hero, the end always justifies the means and good intentions neutralize unethical methods.

In addition to the three characteristics of Eastern European grotesque heroism (mental dimness, bodily needs, and amorality), we can identify a fourth element that John Snyder calls "satiric literalism" ("The Politics" 293), which pertains to the grotesque hero's use of language. Satiric literalism plays an important role in unveiling the

duplicities and the deceptions that dominated communist reality. Its effect is that, since "[w]e cannot read behind or underneath Švejk's talk, figuring intentions and hypothesizing motives according to some subtext [...]. As readers we must, instead, emulate Švejk as a transparent speaker by taking his words literally. Then we can see what these words *do*—they satirize" (Snyder, "The Politics" 294). The grotesque hero refuses to decode the intricate code systems, complex metaphors, and to act in accordance with the official "doublethink." By interpreting language non-metaphorically, he insists on a minimal yet stable denotation in a world that is otherwise characterized by a surplus of connotative meanings, a world that thrives on obscure symbolism and double meaning. The transparency of language works as a criticism of the overabundance and ambiguity of hegemonic discourses. Executing orders to the word and interpreting language literally reestablishes the lost sense of connection between signifier and signified. Verbatim interpretations generate a forced transparency between language and the world, and thus they are key in opposing a political system that relies on deception through opaque and equivocal language. Ultimately, the grotesque hero's insistence on a literal and monolithic signification unmasks the semantic chaos that characterized most political regimes in Eastern Europe, but which particularly saturated the extreme contradictions of communism.

Satiric literalism and strong fictionality are important elements of the grotesque because they allow the paradoxes of Eastern European communist reality to unfold. Slavoj Žižek's remark that "the ideological fantasy structures reality itself" (1989: 44) in Kafka's work can be applied to the grotesque hero's universe in general. This world shows that in the communist order "the mise-en-scène of fantasy [was] at work in the

midst of social reality itself" (36). The "freedom of fantasy" (Bakhtin 49) that liberates the grotesque hero from the constraints of morality and rationality mockingly reflects on a similar "freedom of fantasy" that dominated communist reality. The shaping of reality through fiction in grotesque comedy mirrored the way communist ideology overdetermined reality in the second half of the twentieth century. Stories have vital importance for the grotesque hero because they affect and validate his existence; but in a realist manner they also reproduce the fundamentally fantastic quality of Eastern European existence. The way fictional stories transpire narrative reality corresponds to the way that fictional narratives dominated everyday life under communism.

Other Incarnations of the Grotesque Hero

If, as Bakhtin argues, the gay laughter of the medieval carnival changed to tragedy and horror in Romanticism, the figure of the grotesque hero signaled a return to the carnival's comic origins in Eastern European cinema. The numerous film adaptations and sequels of Hašek's book show the enduring importance of this figure in Eastern European culture. Originally published in 1923, Švejk's adventures became so popular in the entire region that the story resurfaced in the medium of film, television, opera, and even musical. Various versions of the story appeared all over the region. For instance, Jiří Trnka, a Czech artist created an animated film based on the novel (*Dobrý voják Švejk*, 1955) and in the two years Karel Steklý filmed two different adaptations (*Dobrý voják Švejk*, 1957 and *Poslusne hlásím*, 1958). Not much later, in 1960 a West German revision followed (*Der Brave Soldat Schwejk*, 1960) starring the very popular comic actor Heinz Rühmann. Austria also produced its own 13 part TV series in 1972 starring yet another

very well liked actor, Fritz Muliar.[31] Bertold Brecht himself was so much fascinated with Hašek's novel that he wrote a sequel to it in 1943 while in exile in the United States. *Schweik in the Second World War* goes on to describe the great hero's adventures in World War II. Arthur Koestler also worked on a follow-up that, unfortunately, remained uncompleted. The film adaptations that took place in the 1950s and 60s show a lasting relevance of the idiot-hero in the new, communist political regimes. The ongoing popularity of Švejk's figure indicates that the ideological permutations in the region's history left certain structures of feeling untouched.

In the Eastern European cinematic tradition we encounter many reincarnations of the Švejkian prototype, most characteristically defined by a strong sense of practicality when faced with the irrational world.[32] One of them is Frank Dolas (Marian Kociniak), the central character in the famous Polish TV mini-series, *How I Unleashed World War II*, (*Jak rozpętałem II wojnę światową* Part 1, 2, and 3, Tadeusz Chmielewski, 1969). In order to demonstrate Dolas' grotesque heroism I will focus here on the first part of the series. Dolas is established as a Švejkian figure from the opening scene when he oversleeps his contingent's deployment on the Polish/German border. Left on the train alone, he travels straight into the enemy's headquarters. The contrast made between the

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[31] Other adaptations include *Dobrý voják Švejk* (1926), *Švejk na fronté* (1926), *Švejk v ruském zajetí* (1926), *Švejk v civilu* (1927), *Dobrý voják Švejk* (1931), *Švejk bourá ně mecko* (1943), *Dobrý voják Švejk* (1955), *Die Schwejks Flegeljahre* (*Švejkova klackovitá léta,* 1963), *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka* (1986).

[32] Other comedies centering on Švejkian strategies of survival are: *Closely Watched Trains* (*Ostře sledované vlaky*, 1966, Jirí Menzel), *Who is Singing Overthere?* (*Ko to tamo peva*, Slobodan Šijan, 1981), *Let Go of My Beard!* (*Ereszd el a szakállamat!* Péter Bacsó, 1975), *Time is Up* (*Idő van*, Péter Gothár, 1985), *When I am Pale and Dead* (*Kad budem mrtav i beo*, Živojin Pavlović, 1967), *My Sweet Little Village* (*Vesnička má středisková*, Jirí Menzel, 1985).

Germans preparing for their first attack on Poland and Dolas peacefully snoring in his train compartment engenders an absurd clash between what viewers know to be the waking horror of World War II and the naïve cluelessness of the "sleeping" Poland. What one German officer claims to be "the last three minutes Europe can sleep peacefully" is comically projected onto Dolas' serene face through a close-up, making him an embodiment of the Polish nation, unaware of the threat of German occupation.

The moment when Dolas wakes up is also the moment when the German army attacks Poland, giving him the impression that somehow *he* has caused the war. This false assumption of an exaggerated historical agency drives the comic narrative about Dolas' relentless yet unsuccessful effort to get back to the battlefield and to correct his initial mistake. Claiming World War II to be his own doing gives Dolas a discursive power to control history, but simultaneously it mocks the idea of conventional heroic agency. The close encounter between the grotesque hero and history is therefore simultaneously empowering and disempowering as it critically reproduces the collision between the individual and the reality of World War II. It is empowering in that an obviously subnormal individual is portrayed as the central player in the historical events; but it also radically challenges the possibilities of traditional historical agency.

Burlesque is an important element of the grotesque in Eastern European cinema. Dolas' chaplinesque manners signal ineptness, but this is strategic because stupidity liberates him from the perverse logic of the ongoing war and it often helps him to survive its dangers. Dolas' physical comedy is the source of much comic tension in the film. His clumsiness often pushes the narrative forward as he overcomes the predicaments he created. For instance, when captured and placed in a POW camp, Dolas finds a seemingly

easy route of escape through the roof. Yet, in a burlesque scene he repeatedly blows his chances to run away due to his incompetence. Finally, he is recaptured and has to look for another, more complicated way out. Later, he is knocked out in a pub fight and kidnapped by the crew of a Croatian ship. His job is to shove coal into the boat's engine, but he accidentally pushes down a handle that causes the whole ship to sink. Of course, once again he miraculously survives. Dolas' physical comedy is part of his strategic imbecility to cope with the incomprehensible, volatile reality around him.

Dolas is shrewd and dumb at the same time; it is impossible to separate the two elements or to rationalize his behavior. Participation in history makes him a hero despite himself. He repeatedly declares that his goal is to find his regiment and to stop the war. Yet, Dolas goes around in circles and visits bars, embassies, commercial ships, POW camps, and Austrian and Yugoslavian villages, and never reaches the battlefield. These contradictions and inconsistencies in Dolas' character match perfectly the irrational world that he has to navigate. His grotesque behavior suits perfectly the absurdities of his adventures in World War II. His quest is a symbolic struggle of the powerless individual against overwhelming historical forces. Practicality and idiocy are Dolas' main source of agency, which help him come out on top.

H.M. Deserters (*C. K. Dezerterzy*, Janusz Majewski, 1986) is another example of collective self-empowerment through grotesque heroism. The film re-imagines Austro-Hungarian imperial relations by creating the image of a disobedient soldier who takes revenge on the imperial army for exploiting and maltreating the ethnic minorities and he gets away with it. The story relays the adventures and misadventures of a military company placed on the multiethnic border between Hungary and Austria. The new über-

leutenanat, von Nogay (Wojciech Pokora) decides to reform the indolent company, who spend their days drinking and gambling in the local brothel. Von Nogay is the quintessential example of how under Austrian hegemony the empire's minority ethnic groups were exploited and repressed. His determination to enforce military order meets with the resistance of the soldiers lead by corporal Kania (Marek Kondrat). In Kania's character, the film legitimizes Švejkian practicality as a behavioral model.

As the Austro-Hungarian Empire is falling apart, its military is in complete disorder, and the soldiers don't hesitate to take advantage of the corruption and disarray. Corporal Kania and his companions show no moral obligations towards their officers or the country. They spend the time playing cards, drinking, and visiting brothels. To provide the necessary funds for these activities, they shake down civilians threatening to arrest them. Amorality is presented in the film as a normal and appropriate response in the chaos-ridden world of the ailing empire and the terror of the war. When for instance, corporal Kania accidentally blackmails a secret police officer for money, to his surprise, he is nominated for an award for outstanding patrolling. The reward for such immoral behavior is symbolic of the absurdity of the system to which Kania adapts very effectively as a grotesque hero.

The soldiers' disloyalty goes hand in hand with shrewd plotting to take revenge on von Nogay and finally to escape from the military base. Corporal Kania is particularly cunning in undermining the authority of his superiors. For example, when the captain of the base, who is probably the most reasonable character in the movie, asks why he teaches nonsense to the soldiers in the German language class, Kania puts on an idiotic face and claims that he is only following von Nogay's orders to teach them in a parrot-

like manner since von Nogay believes that all non-German soldiers are too stupid to formulate their own sentences in German. Through self-deprecation and pretended obliviousness, Kania reveals the über-leutenant's stupidity as well as his own wit. His mask of idiocy conceals his hatred and disrespect towards the German officer.

The film's grotesque heroism is important for two reasons: first, it celebrates the failure of the Austrian powers to subjugate and control the empire's subordinated nations; and secondly, it re-establishes the agency of the repressed to revolt and to shake off the imperial chains. The soldiers' practicality, amoral behavior, and pretended idiocy help them to become active subjects and to take control over history. In the final, apocalyptic scene the soldiers set the entire military base on fire. They burn all official documents and desert the fort during the night. Such complete liberation from the imperial and military control is unimaginable except in grotesque terms. Grotesque heroism allows for the oppressed to outlast the oppressor and the exploited to take revenge through the collective imaginary.

The film rewrites history from the point of view of the exploited presenting the Poles, Czechs, Serbs, etc. as crucial players in the demise of their empire. The image of the grotesque hero transforms history's victims into winners, which had important implications for the historical moment of the film's release. The wittily masked insubordination is a manifestation of a retrograde defilement of Austria-Hungary's imperial peril that relates to the communist moment in Eastern Europe's twentieth century history as well. The story about World War I is in dialogue with the Soviet imperial presence in the region's politics after 1945. Through the figure of the grotesque hero, the film offers agency to the oppressed, and ultimately it opens up ways for the

collective to imagine itself as capable of mocking, resisting, and revolting against external and internal hegemonic oppression.

Finally, my claim about the popularity of the grotesque heroic archetype needs to be refined in light of films such as Andrzej Munk's *Bad Luck*/*Cock-eyed Luck* (*Zezowate szczęście*, 1959), which is a more critical take on the subject. As opposed to other comedies, *Bad Luck* does not so much celebrate the opportunism of its protagonist as it relies on the Švejkian figure to depict a dark, merciless, and chaotic image of Polish society. In an autobiographic account, Piszczyk (Bogumil Kobiela) tells the story of his (mis)fortunes in Poland from the 1930s to the 1950s. The film is a flashback of Piszczyk's memories in which he describes his struggles and the bad luck he experienced in outliving rapidly and randomly changing historical forces.

Just like Švejk, Piszczyk is an unreliable narrator, a crook and an opportunist who has no political or social consciousness of any kind. His physical and mental incapacitation is manifested in chaplinesque clumsiness and is paired with his inability to understand political or social intricacies that keep changing dramatically. Piszczyk also faces the tank of history coming though the wall. Although in his own telling, he is simply trying to fit in and get by in a hostile world, the forces of history prove to be against him. First, he is ridiculed as a child and beaten for his large nose, which makes him a victim of anti-Semitism even though he is not Jewish. Later, he joins the Nazi youth organization to be safe from harassment, but is beaten again—this time by the police when despite himself he is drawn into a political demonstration. In the war, his bad luck follows him as he is captured before even getting to the front. In the POW camp where he is sent he is sequestered because of his notorious lies. Finally, his enthusiastic

embrace of socialism also meets with suspicion. In an outbreak of insanity, he attempts to shoot a jealous colleague who plotted to end his promising career as a statistician at a state company.

The grotesque hero's resistance towards hegemonic powers in *Bad Luck* is represented as total confusion and disorientation. Piszczyk acts only out of love, vanity, or a desire to be safe. Typical to Eastern European existence, he tries to avoid trouble, but somehow always finds himself in the middle of it. Only mundane things interest him—such as women and money—and the desire to fit in drives every decision he makes. The result is that he repeatedly joins the side of incumbent power, which backfires in the unpredictable twists and turns of history. When he is caught between two political demonstrations—a Polish nationalist and a fascist sympathizer group—to stay safe he shouts slogans in support of both crowds. Yet, he alone is arrested and beaten by the police afterwards. He joins the army for the romance of the uniform, but when he finally comes across one in a deserted military base, the Germans, who destroyed the camp, mistake him for an officer and transfer him to a POW camp. Amoral behavior is central to Piszczyk's improvised strategies of survival, but also his demise. In order to survive in the POW camp he lies about his heroic activities in the war. Once again he brings his bad luck onto himself when the other soldiers find out about his deceptions and segregate him. The volatile historical events interfere and crush Piszczyk's prospects in life, and his comic attempts to survive are presented in a critical light—not so much heroic as pathetic.

Piszczyk's entire story can be looked at as a linguistic fabrication, a subjective tale that he alone has produced about his life. While he seems to have very little control

over reality, significantly he is in full control of the narrative. He literally creates himself through the story as the victim of a hostile world and acquits himself through meticulous explanations and excuses. Language and the image are as questionable and suspect here as they are powerful in conveying Piszczyk's unfortunate adventures. The fabricated nature of the stories is sometimes more obvious (in the prison camp) and sometimes less (the autobiography itself) but it is recognizably present. His claim that "I just did the best I could" rings familiar yet false, since Piszczyk's full command of the narrative makes it impossible to decide whether indeed he was crushed by history or caused his misfortunes himself.

Bad Luck portrays the Polish nation's fate in the storms of twentieth century history. Piszczyk is an idiot or else he uses idiocy as a strategy to survive the relentless strife that surrounds him. However, unlike other film comedies that celebrate such behavior, *Bad Luck* makes fun of Piszczyk himself and presents him as an anti-hero even though he is clearly the victim of private *and* collective history. The film is critical not only of the violent forces of history that throw people around, but also of Piszczyk's self-victimization, unreliability, and pathetic compliance. His character is not so much a behavioral model; it is closer to a cynical example of how historical trauma debilitates the individual on a private level. But even such a critical take on this cultural prototype confirms my argument about the prevalence of grotesque heroism in the Eastern European imaginary. As *Bad Luck* plays with questions of identification and dis-identification, it relies on the popular image of the grotesque hero to make its hilarious albeit bitter comment about the fate and hopes of the individual to survive in the various political turmoil that have defined so much of Eastern Europe's history.

Conclusions

The Eastern European experience of living in permanent political and ideological experimentation found a fictional reaction in the grotesque aesthetics, and it legitimized a radical understanding of what it meant to act as a hero in the world. The grotesque hero was a celebrated cultural image because he/she engendered a critical and gay participation in a world often perceived as irrational. Martin Esslin states that the absurd "expresses modern man's endeavor to come to terms with the world in which he lives" (429). Such preoccupation is typical to the Eastern European grotesque as well in that it proposes laughter as a way to deal with "a world in which man is powerless in a gadget-oriented, alienated reality" (Kosík 86).

The traditional hero is typically described as "someone who is guided by fundamental principles 'beyond the pleasure principle' and not just by the search for pleasure and material gain" (Žižek 1989: 27). In other words, he is someone with extraordinary physical power and a incorruptible sense of moral justice like *Braveheart* or *Spiderman*, and whose ontological purpose is nothing less than to restore equilibrium to a world that is out of balance. Ironically, the appearance of the socialist hero in the official cultures of Eastern Europe did not change this romanticized image of heroism, but instead reconfirmed and sometimes even exaggerated it.

However, Eastern European reality repeatedly destroyed the possibility of and belief in such traditional concepts of heroism. Instead, the collective imaginary gave birth to švejkism, a new prototype of bravery and a radical model of survival. When Molnár refuses ideological commitment and Pelikán finds communism to be just as rotten as fascism, or when Švejk ironically connects his enemas to the high cause of the empire,

they all speak to the individual's desire to endure Eastern European history. These figures are as persistent in the cultural production of Eastern Europe as is the absurdity of their world. "We muddle along as we can," says Švejk at one point in the book (131). The plural in his assertion is perfectly justified because, unlike its lonely, romantic, and individualized manifestation, the grotesque hero is a communal-folk figure, a representative of collective strategies of survival implemented by all Eastern European societies.

As long as clowns were kings and the king was a ridiculous clown, as long as violating basic ethical codes was fashionable, and as long as lie and truth were inseparable, the image of this radical hero would continue to resonate in the collective imagination. Eastern Europeans often found themselves in situations "in which they were heroes in spite of themselves, heroes in the Švejkian sense [...]" (Petkovic 380). Grotesque heroism spoke to many generations who have spent their energies maintaining a basic existential stability in the surrounding historical chaos and whose everyday lives moved around the technical details of how to maintain basic material and existential security.

Under these circumstances, the grotesque hero's thoroughly material existence and satiric literalism posited a challenge to the incongruities between ideology and reality and the doublethink that dominated life. If special times required special heroes, the grotesque hero—ready to conform to all "states of exception"—served as an alternative to the romanticized hero promoted by communist mythology. The grotesque re-conceptualization of heroism became central because it allowed for the "repetitive, resourceful popping-up of life—whatever the catastrophe, no matter how dark the

predicament, we can be sure in advance that the little fellow will find a way out" (Žižek 2001: 85). By matching words with their referent and by experiencing the world primarily through the lower bodily stratum, the grotesque hero brought communist discourse and material reality closer to each other. He was a cultural confirmation that the various historical derailments and social experimentations passed basically unrealized at the bodily, material level and that the "docile bodies" so much desired by the imperial, fascist, and communist regimes could rebuke ideological interpellation through art's carnivalesque "freedom of fantasy" (Bakhtin 49).

Chapter 4

How Can You Fuck (with) the System? Political Resistance and the Female Body

"*In fact, humor is a mechanism of counter-repression; truth is a weapon of counter-repression; joy, all kinds of happiness and creation are anti-repressive actions*." Dušan Makavejev

"*If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets the established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom*." (Foucault 6).

The prevalence of the grotesque comedy in Eastern European cinema is an indication that the communist state's biopolitics ultimately failed to generate the necessary "docile bodies" for its survival. Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality* revealed how sovereign powers need bodily compliance to maintain themselves. Despite the aggressive attempts to control and order its subjects, communist interpellation was never achieved effectively. The voluntary internalization of hegemonic structures did not happen, because the incongruence between official language and material reality, between historical recollection and subjective memory, and between the state's biopolitics and the body was never successfully overcome. Grotesque and carnivalesque elements in cinema were important, early indications of what eventually caused the gradual deterioration of communist systems.

Bakhtin argued that the liberating element of the carnival primarily constitutes itself through the body. The grotesque mode, in other words, relies heavily on bodily affects to generate a counter-cultural, collective fantasy of liberation. Chapter 3 examined one way in which the physical and the political are organically linked in Eastern

European grotesque comedies—namely, through the figure of the grotesque hero. The analysis to follow will investigate another aspect of Bakhtinian corporal politics focusing on the relationship between the carnival and the construction of gender/patriarchy. My assumption is that, just like in the medieval carnival, gender played a crucial role in envisioning strategies of cultural resistance in Eastern European cinema. More specifically, I make the case that grotesque realism often turned to female body through patriarchal fetishistic fantasies to invigorate the masculine phallic authority curtailed by the communist totalitarian state. The films are symptomatic of the pornographic pleasure inscribed in the cinematic image that Laura Mulvey called the "the gaze" in her famous essay on visual pleasure and narrative cinema referring to a specifically masculine look in film that objectifies the female body.[33]

Natalie Zemon Davis, in her discussion of women's potential to subvert political order in early modern France, talks about a duplicity that characterized female transvestitism. On the one hand, images of strong, sexualized Amazon-like women "sanction[ed] riot and political disobedience for both men and women" (131) in seventeenth century France and England; on the other hand, cross-dressing was mostly practiced by men in order to express social criticism without having to suffer severe punishment under the law (since women were considered half-citizens, their legal categorization was fairly loose). Presenting women-on-top in the Rabelaisque carnival of early modern France was a temporary, safe, and comic outlet for social tensions. But, as Davis suggests, it also had a potential to change "the location of power and property" (143) and to prompt new ways of thinking about the system.

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[33] Mulvey's essay, originally published in *Screen* magazine, is widely available (for instance in *Film Theory and Criticism* edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen) and has been elaborated on by feminist film scholars such as E. Ann Kaplan and Kaja Silvermann.

The numerous carnivalesque uprisings in France, Germany, and England, when men marched on the streets, attacked nobility and organized riots in female disguise is an obvious, early example of how throughout history "the female persona authorized [male political] resistance" (Davis 149). This chapter examines a newer development in the long history of paradoxical stagings of the female body. What Davis describes as characteristic of seventeenth century Europe, namely that the males benefitted from the image of the unruly woman and deployed her as a mask to tell the truth about an unjust system, to exercise political criticism, and to reinstate their masculinity in the face of effeminizing, absolute power, is still true 350 years later. According to Mary Ann Doane, woman's carnivalization assigns her "a special place in cinematic representation while denying her access to that [sign] system" (178). My argument puts Doane's statement in a specific geographical and historical context disclosing how oversexualized female bodies have authorized men in communist Eastern Europe to revolt against the official political order; in other words, historical turmoil in the region is often recorded on and/or projected onto women's bodies.

The exploration/exploitation of the sexualized woman has long been a characteristic of the Eastern European cultural imaginary.[34] The grotesque comedies show a specifically strong inclination to construct rebellious and naked images of the female body as a way to criticize the authoritarian nature of the communist system. The films' pronounced staging of the sexualized woman I see as a disguise for political revolt and resistance because it has the potential to momentarily invert existing hierarchies. Yet, woman in these films is also a means by which specifically *masculine* subjects inscribe

[34] See Anikó Imre's article, "Comparative Central European Culture: Gender in Literature and Film" for more on the long tradition of patriarchal structures dominating representations of female subjectivity.

their desire for political liberation in relatively safe ways. Her image pleases the male sexual and political imagination, and thus it confirms basic patriarchal values in Eastern European societies.

Slavoj Žižek observed that the communist state apparatuses were impressively effective in finding ways "to block access to enjoyment" (1991: 237). By enforcing an *obligation* to enjoy through controlled celebrations, organized free-time, and carefully orchestrated festivities, well-behaved communist bodies were choreographed through official state rituals. The communist Ideological State Apparatuses purposefully de-sexualized the body; they introduced what Herbert Marcuse called an ideologically motivated "surplus repression," aggressively channeling libidinal energy towards *labor* in order "to make the organism into a subject-object of socially useful performances" (199) for the communist state. However, the manipulation of bodies through biopolitics was seen as domination because it was done through forceful coercion without logic, pleasure, or voluntary participation.

Woman's life under communism was curiously schizophrenic—and absurd—typical of the whole political system. Although the desire to emancipate woman existed on a discursive level, the practical solution to dissolve patriarchal structures simply commanded the full inclusion of women into the labor force (see Einhorn). The official (re)presentations desexualized women's bodies and instead presented "liberation" as labor. Equal work was supposed to solve all gender inequalities automatically and to lead to an ideal state of equilibrium between all communist subjects. Instead however, women's participation in the labor force only doubled the burden on their shoulders and created an absurd incongruence between theory (emancipation, equality, brotherhood)

and practice (mandatory practices of production and reproduction). While theoretically free and equal to men through their labor, women had to bear the *triple* burden of the new communist subjectivity: they were supposed to work fulltime, to continue to perform the duties assigned to them by the long tradition of patriarchal domination at home, and also to fulfill their responsibility to the nation and the state by reproducing copiously. In other words, women's bodies were understood simply as tools: laboring either for economic or national prosperity.[35]

Under these circumstances, the re-sexualization of the female body through an aesthetic/cinematic masquerade should be interpreted as a political statement. Through staging female erotica, the grotesque modality offers an important fantasy of revolt against manufactured corporal docility and it demonstrates that the body can be a vessel of resistance against hegemony. In opposition to the "*obligation* to enjoy," the grotesque proposes to "enjoy *despite*"—a transgressive pleasure of libidinal explosion carefully repressed and controlled by the communist state. In Marcusian terms, the sexualized image of woman "overflows the institutionalized limits" (Marcuse 200) of the communist state, which organized and repressed her body through official rituals.

Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich both challenge Freud's view that "cultural achievements result from sublimated sexual energy" (Reich 1974: 10); in other words, that culture's very existence depends on libidinal repression. Their postulation is that the repression of sexual pleasure ultimately leads to fascism and tyrannical societies, where people are utterly unhappy. Sexual fulfillment therefore plays a crucial role in constructing a healthy "dynamics of emotional life" (Reich 1982: 4), in freeing the self

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[35] For details about women's role in communist societies see Einhorn, Funk, Gal, Lapidus, and Kligman.

from repressive moral inhibitions, and finally in arriving at a healthy dynamics of socio-political relationships. The analysis in this chapter discloses precisely how "biological drive becomes a cultural drive" (Marcuse 212) towards political freedom. It argues that Foucault's "docile bodies" found a way to rebel against authoritarian control in their carnivalesque display of sexual hyperactivity. The overtly sexual images in the grotesque present "the energy of the human body [to] rebel against intolerable repression and [to] throw itself against the engine of repression" (Marcuse xix).

What I find problematic is that most often it is specifically *woman* who is thrown against the totalitarian engine of repression. Susan Bordo describes the female body as "a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical comment of a culture are inscribed" (90) and so, she claims, the examination of bodily representations provides "the blueprint for diagnosis and/or vision of social and political life" (90). The way woman is staged in the film comedies speaks to a general problem in the relationship between the body and ideology in the communist state. But it also raises specific questions about gender relations in Eastern Europe such as: why is masculine solidarity and political revolt so often engendered through naked images of women? What does it mean that social and political life under communism was envisioned, projected onto, and readable on the female body? Carnival, cinema, and sexuality share the potential to erase the boundaries between self and other, private and public. But what remains of female subjectivity when it is subjugated and sacrificed to the "political cause"?

Communism made it obvious, as Elisabeth Grosz noted, that the "body is indeed the privileged object of power's operations" (149), which perpetuates itself through strict surveying, organizing, and controlling. The communist authorities manufactured

compliant, asexual bodies ready to produce and reproduce at an advanced rate, to surpass quotas, to stand in lines endlessly, to conglomerate, and to dissolve under state order as well as to fulfill reproductive duties. Therefore, any representation of sexuality in the socialist Eastern European imagination could not be *apolitical*. The long tradition of patriarchal structures allowed female sexuality to carry a political weight against the totalitarian ordering of the body. The patriarchal bias helped the mask of sexuality to "pass" through censorship and become part of the cultural anti-politics that characterized the post-1968 era. Since the omnipresent, authoritarian power of the communist state forced both men and women into subjugation and conformity, erotic explorations provided a way for them to regain their lost sense of political agency and to allow them to revolt and "remasculinize" (Susan Jeffords). Under these circumstances, Svetlana Boym observes, female erotica "allowed individual liberation when political liberty was only a dream" (2001: 241). However, in my view, the "'ideologically incorrect' particularism of individual pleasure against all kinds of [communist] collective discourses" (2001: 214) primarily belonged to *men*.

Following Elisabeth Grosz's definition of patriarchy as "a system of universal male right to the appropriation of women's bodies" (9) I argue that the ideological work of grotesque realism moves largely within a patriarchal framework. The male characters in the films generally have complete control over and right to the female body, which transforms the Enlightenment's dream of social and physical alliance against oppression and injustice into a mere fantasy (see Conboy). Woman's body is not part of collective solidarity, it is only a vessel through which this unity comes into being; it is a terrain over which male bodies unite to oppose the tyranny of communist totalitarianism. The female

erotica in the grotesque enables an—albeit imaginary—fulfillment of the specifically *male* desire to claim national identity, egalitarianism, and political revolt in safe or even pleasurable ways.

The iconic Czechoslovak movie, *Closely Watched Trains* (Jiří Menzel, 1968), discussed at length in Chapter 2, is exemplary of how the comedies connect political resistance to masculine fetishistic fantasies. A young woman, Virginia who works at the train station's telegraph machine provokes and seduces Hubička, the train dispatcher. Their sexual games are politically transgressive: he covers the woman's bare thighs and behind with the official stamps of the railway company. Hubička's use of the stamps unites sexual pleasure with a political dissent that mocks the institutional markers of state bureaucracy. Virginia's stickered and naked body vulgarizes the stamps' symbolic power to authorize and to forbid, in other words, to exercise domination. Yet, it also reveals how the female body serves as an erotic topography for the masculine desire. The young woman enjoys her objectification by the male gaze, and her pleasure is a coded reflection of Hubička's desire to revolt against the oppressive Nazi occupation. When the telegrapher's mother, horrified to discover the sexually and politically marked body of her daughter, decides to seek retaliation, she is more than keen to show her daughter's physical and moral "damage" to the exclusively *male* representatives of authority: the stationmaster, the court judges, and finally the railway officials. Virginia's body and sexual transgression are simultaneously on display in the close-up images of her body meant to make a symbolic statement of resistance. Although the authorities pretend to sternly condemn the immoral and politically subversive deed, their eyes pleasurably

devour the sight of the young and beautiful female body, and the close-ups confirm that a fundamentally masculine gaze dominates the film.

Viktoria Freie's character is another example of how political freedom and sexual fulfillment are intertwined in *Closely Watched Trains*. She is the underground agent who provides the insurgent Hubička and Miloš with the bomb that will blow up a closely watched, German train. Moreover, she is happy to be the first sexual experiment for Miloš and assists in the birth of his heroic masculine agency. Through the encounter with the sexually experienced Victoria Freie and through his healthy orgasmic release, Miloš finally becomes a politically potent individual ready to become part of the secret political resistance. There are many other examples throughout the film of how female sexual potency ultimately transforms into male political agency. These include Hubička's supposed cousin who readily sleeps with him and Masha, the ticket collector, whose love for Miloš is surprisingly strong in view of his feebleness and repeated failure to satisfy her.

Miloš and Hubička's obsessive preoccupation with sex does not mean a disconnection from reality; quite the contrary, it induces a sense of potency that culminates in their guerilla act. Their obsession with women is a protective camouflage that helps them get close enough to the enemy in order to blow it up. Hence, sexual satisfaction, the male enjoyment of a full orgasm, and sexual hyperactivity are manifestations of overflowing libidinal energy and make the body the main source of political resistance in the film. Yet, such a carnivalesque travesty of official authority is only possible at the expense of woman's objectification.

Eastern European grotesque cinema relies on the hypersexualized female as a trope to facilitate the construction of masculine political agency, which puts her image into a fundamentally *paradoxical* position. I use the word paradoxical because on the one hand, female sexuality is a mask, a cover for a cinematic guerilla operation to blow a hole in the cultural imaginary of the communist state. On the other hand, woman is staged to please the male gaze and to act in accordance with clearly retrograde, masculine fantasies of forever recumbent, flirtatious, and perfect female bodies. In what follows, I shall scrutinize specific examples to uncover this unresolved contradiction in Eastern European cinema—the way they imagine the female body as a locus for masculine political resistance.

WR: Mysteries of an Organism

In *The History of Sexuality* Michel Foucault claims that, contrary to what might seem to be logical, "pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement" (48). In this enfolding relationship between pleasure and power, *desire* plays a key role. But the desire that locks them into the same political economy is never gender neutral—most often it belongs to the masculine subject. Male desire stands at the center of *WR: Mysteries of and Organism* (*W.R.—Misterije organizma*, Dušan Makavejev, 1971) and *Sound Eroticism* (*Egészséges erotika*, Péter Tímár, 1983) as both films directly and explicitly incorporate images of the female body, perverse or unfulfilled longings to subvert the aesthetic and political straightjacket of socialist reality. The sexualized female body in these films stands in for

the missing political body, sexual repression is symbolic of political oppression, and sexual revolution works as an allegory for the crushed dreams of political reform. The female body provides a symbolic terrain for the struggle for power in a Foucauldian sense: between domination and resistance, oppression and revolt.

Both comedies disclose and mock the different ways in which communist ideology fails to generate the libidinal intensity necessary for its own maintenance. Similarly to the Rabelaisian carnival described by Bakhtin, they show the social and political battles against communist hegemony taking place on the body (specifically on woman's body). The (over)sexualization of women's images in the films therefore should not be viewed as manifestations of individual or private desire, but as a collective attempt to allow politically charged negative energies to be released through the carnivalesque sexualization of woman's body.

Dušan Makavejev's overall oeuvre is characterized by a satiric preoccupation with sex, politics, and film language. Makavejev is an important representative of Eastern European New Wave cinema, specifically its Yugoslav version called "Black Cinema," which is characterized by aesthetic experimentation, a multitude of styles, strong affinity for montage, and the incorporation of multiple genres. Ultimately his films, although not always funny, demonstrate a fascination with sexuality, the body, power, and violence. According to Paul Arthur, Makavejev's work presents a "matrix of cherished images" (14) all pointing in the direction of his interest in combining Marxist theories of class struggle with Freudian concepts of sexual repression and liberation in order to unmask the gaps and contradictions of communist reality in Eastern Europe.

By thematizing sexuality, in *WR: Mysteries of an Organism*, Makavejev offers alternative structures in the mechanism of power, while the film's innovative, avant-garde aesthetics helps imagine alternative political strategies of resistance. *WR: Mysteries of an Organism* was probably the culmination of Makavajev's professional success and, ironically, also what launched his political persecution and artistic exile. *WR* was shown at the Cannes Films Festival in 1971, where reportedly the screening ended with a thirteen minute long ovation and resulted in six more screenings due to public and press demands. The film won the *Prix Luis Bunuel* and the *L'Age d'Or* award of the Paris Cinemathèque. It also won the award for Best Director at the Chicago Film Festival that year. Yet, its reception was very different at home: It was banned in Yugoslavia until 1986 and no Eastern European country purchased it for distribution. Makavejev himself had to face the threat of jail and chose to go into self-exile in Western Europe, and later in the U.S. After he turned down Francis Ford Coppola's invitation to direct *Apocalypse Now*, he made the scandalous *Sweet Movie* (1974) in France. Later, in the U.S., he taught filmmaking while he also directed films produced in various countries. These films included *Montenegro* (Sweden, 1981), *The Coca Cola Kid* (Australia, 1985) or *The Gorilla Bathes at Noon* (West Germany, 1993).

One critic of *WR: Mysteries of an Organism* suggested that, "there is a danger that the film's flippant tone will make Makavejev's treatment of sex and politics seem deceptively facile and frivolous" (MacBean 6). My view is quite different: precisely the film's "frivolous" nature helps generate a sense of liberation and freedom against the dictatorial nature of communism that characterized Tito's Yugoslavia. Makavejev uses the language of film and the language of the body to show a discrepancy between

communist ideology and reality and to argue for a connection between individual satisfaction and social prosperity.

Although *WR* was a Yugoslav-West German production, a good part of it takes place in the United States. The film combines three central plots along with a variety of subplots. First, there is a frame-narrative that introduces the poet and performance artist Tuli Kupferberg who, dressed as a soldier, marches down the street in a poor neighborhood of New York. He then pretends to be in a battle around Wall Street, and finally, as a climactic ending to the film, he symbolically masturbates with his gun. The second major thematic element is a documentary about Wilhelm Reich (hence the title: "WR"), the famous Austrian psychologist who theorized the relationship between social freedom and free love. Combining Marxist and Freudian concepts, Reich argued that repression and sublimation of sexual desires are in fact symptoms of class struggle and that sexual prohibition serves the interest of the ruling class. This section includes a variety of footage from the United States, where Reich was a fugitive during World War II. We see original images of Reich himself, interviews with his family and his followers as well as demonstrations of his method known as "vegetotherapy."

The third plotline disrupts the documentary about Reich and focuses on a young Yugoslav communist, Milena (Milena Dravić) and her roommate, Jagoda (Jagoda Kaloper) who both strongly advocate sexual freedom as the right path towards socialist revolution. Milena is mesmerized by the Russian ice-skating artist, Vladimir Illych (Ivica Vidović) who is on tour in Belgrade. Their brief encounter turns into a tragedy however, when, unable to fulfill his orgasmic urge, Vladimir Illych decapitates Milena with his skate. Into this convulsion of already complex cinematic materials, a few subplots are

inserted. One reoccurring scene follows Jackie Curtis, an American transvestite walking on the streets of New York City and telling the story of his sexual awakening. Another subplot shows Betty Dodson, an artist who asks friends to masturbate in her studio while she draws their pictures. We also witness artist Nancy Godfrey who makes a cast of the Australian football player Jim Buckley's erect penis. In addition, Soviet propaganda films, shots of Stalin's statue, a mass celebration of Mao, and a photo shooting at *Screw* magazine compose the remainder of the film's boisterous collage.

Makavejev's textual and sexual politics correspond with each other—they both attempt to unmask the phallic nature of communist imperialism through carnivalesque subversion. Its moments of self-referentiality (e.g. direct address to the camera, intertitles, montage technique) and the overabundance of cinematic genres (the documentary about Wilhelm Reich, the transsexual and the different performance artists, the Yugoslav fictional story, the archival footage of a mental hospital, and a social realist film about Stalin) create a radically new aesthetic that undermines the phallic nature of traditional narrative cinema. Makavejev's style has been repeatedly characterized as "collage"—a cinematic technique developed by Sergei Eisenstein, and adopted by the Surrealist avant-garde as well neo-avant-garde cinematic movements in the 1960s. The Makavejevian montage combines playful style and open interpretative strategies with very specific socio-historical foregrounding. While they both understand their aesthetic choices as political, Paul Arthur asserts, "in place of Eisenstein's insistence on montage as a template for dialectical argument, Makavejev fosters contradiction for its own sake, withholding the clarifying endpoint of synthesis or resolution" (12). Yet, the open-endedness and multiplicity of meaning, "the clashes of material or stylistic properties—

fiction/documentary, interviews/newsreel, black and white/color, color stock/hand tinting, rapid editing/long takes" (12) do not exist in a "freefall" in Makavejev's films either. They stand in a dialectical relationship with the world that they represent in the best tradition of historical materialism, aiming to collide the aesthetic with the political.

WR is a cinematic manifesto, an argument that emphasizes the connections between two seemingly very different political systems—communism and capitalism—that operate through repression, silencing, and degeneration. The film's aesthetic elements—its self-referentiality, the abundance of genres, and open ending—make it a truly carnivalesque, "orgasmic text." Just like *Dreambrigade* (*Álombrigád*, András Jeles, 1989) and *Birds, Orphans and Fools* (*Vtáčkovia, siroty a blázni*, Juraj Jakubisko, 1969), which use the same montage technique to explore the body and sexuality as weapons against social oppression, *WR* is a perfect illustration of how the carnival element in Eastern European cinema "discreetly bring[s] into coexistence concepts which the fear of ridicule or the bitterness of history prevents most of us from putting side by side: revolution and happiness; […] or indeed revolution and pleasure" (Foucault 7).

Makavejev focuses on Reich not simply to interpret or to comment on his controversial reputation as a Marxist psychoanalyst. The film is a cinematic exploration of the same questions that Reich tackled in his writings. In an interview about *WR*, Makavejev stated that, "the main topic of the film is not sexuality but human personal happiness connected with political freedom" (Sitton 5). The statement underscores my argument that the film utilizes the language of sexuality as a tool to make a case for social liberation through individual satisfaction, and it introduces the libidinal body as a vessel to achieve true social revolution. *WR* visually explores the subject of the body as a

tool to release libidinal energies and to alleviate political as well as sexual repression. This idea is already introduced in the opening scene of the film that shows several hands in an erotic choreography. The hands play messily with an egg yolk passing it along and covering themselves with the yolk fluid once it breaks. The extreme close ups bring into focus the fabric of the body while the music and the sensual dance of the hands choreograph the utterly physical nature of life (cut off hands and egg yolk) in appealing and erotic ways.

A few minutes later, the same idea is elaborated in an archival footage that dates from 1931 and features a young couple making love on a field. Makavejev accompanies the archival images with a song that enthusiastically hails the Communist Party. Such juxtaposition of image and sound draws making love and the love for the Communist Party together as two kinds of the same libidinal energy. The movie thus establishes an organic link early on between bodily energies and the communist system. It shows that they require libido for their maintenance and likewise that ideology fails the minute it stops generating active desire and that both hegemony and liberation to require libidinal investment, a paradox that remains unresolved throughout the film.

WR, in a Reichian way, attempts to unveil the repressive nature of capitalist and fascist, as well as socialist hegemonic powers. The question "Who will protect us from our protectors?"—repeated several times in the film—is an explicit attempt to shatter the hypocritical and paternalistic discourses of self-protection prevalent both in the U.S. and in the Soviet Union's domestic and foreign diplomacy. The individual, who is supposed to consider him/herself protected by the government, like the woman who is supposed to think of man as her "protector" might find that "love" and "protection" are in fact forms

of disguised oppression. The various references to pleasure derived from military power, and the visual allusions to the sexualized relationship between man and gun gain full meaning in the historical contexts of the Vietnam War *and* the imperial efforts of the USSR in Yugoslavia. To put it differently, Kupferberg's symbolic masturbation with a machine gun in New York corresponds to Vladimir Illych[36] decapitating Milena during the orgasmic climax of their intercourse in Belgrade.

Reich's theory[37] links "sexual liberation" to the subversion and destruction of "surplus repression"—a secondary social, economic and political form of oppression. James Roy MacBean argues that, as opposed to Freud, "Reich boldly rejected the value of sublimation, which he saw as still another way in which the ruling class inculcated in the working masses 'civic virtues' which were against individual and class interest. He proclaimed that only free and unmitigated satisfaction of mature genital sexuality could be genuinely healthful and liberating for the individual" (in Sitton 4). Reich also refined Marx's claim that "social being determines 'consciousness'" (Reich 1966: 39) by showing that the dominant ideology manifests itself on the body of the individual and that sexuality adds "a concrete content to this dictum" (ibid.). Ultimately, Reich seeks to answer the question: "in what way does social ideology affect the individual?" (Reich 1966: 26) left open by Marxist theory. In doing so, he utters a central problem in grotesque comedies.

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[36] An obvious allusion to Lenin's given names.

[37] I would like to emphasize here that I am aware of Reich's controversial, if not marginal position in the field of psychoanalysis. My goal in looking at his theory is not to examine or judge its scientific accuracy, which would go beyond my capabilities and the scope of the dissertation. I, similarly to Makavejev himself, am interested in Reich to the extent that his arguments resonate strongly with my assertions regarding the connection between sexual and political repression and liberation as they appear in the Eastern European grotesque realism.

Reich claims that it is specifically the *patriarchal/bourgeois* official culture that depends on sexual suppression. Therefore, doing away with patriarchy means doing away with every form of human domination; and instituting a truly revolutionary communist system means instituting a culture that does not rely on the old hierarchies and moral inhibitions. However, the film ultimately sustains the patriarchal culture so vehemently criticized by Reich because it exploits sexualized and naked images of women to make its case against totalitarianism and for social liberation. For instance, the exclusively male therapists who demonstrate the influence of Reich's therapy in the U.S. use only women patients, whom we see in close-up shots inhaling, exhaling, shaking, screaming, sighing and so on. Behind a veil of scientific inquiry the camera scrutinizes these half-naked female bodies (as they seem to climax) with interest and pleasure. One woman's example is especially telling: accompanied by her male therapist she supposedly regresses to an infantile stage in her sexual development in order to rid herself of all repressions and liberate herself through stimulation and release. But while she sighs and trembles in front of the camera, she also suckles on her therapist's finger—a symbolic allusion to her infantile position in a fundamentally patriarchal relation.

The phallic nature of Soviet imperialism, of the Yugoslav totalitarian regime, and of capitalist consumer culture are all criticized by the film's playful montage association. In several instances, the images of women undergoing Reichian therapy are intercut with marching masses in China, bodies suffering electroshock treatment in the Soviet Union, and lipstick advertisements in Times Square. The montage technique liberates the process of interpretation and broadens the meaning of what pathological deprivation could mean. It draws a parallel between, on the one hand, the way in which communist Yugoslavia

coerced its bodies, subjugated them through totalitarian power and promised them a utopian future, and on the other hand, the way capitalism uses corporeality to maintain its illusions of social perfection.

The body in general serves as a building block for hegemonic ideologies, but it also bears its scars. Through visual/cinematic contextualization the image of the penis in the film turns into a Phallus and becomes an embodiment of the Symbolic order. Erect penises are generally not sources of pleasure in *WR*. For Milena and Jagoda, the penis is only a tool to achieve their revolutionary goals; for the artist it is a model; for the soldier it is a gun; for the transvestite it is an obstacle preventing her from purely female existence; and finally for Vladimir Illych his penis means control. Through the pronounced phallic imagery *WR* draws a parallel between Vladimir Illych's sexual perversion that needs violence to climax and the Stalinist political perversions that relied on tyranny. Stalin, Mao, and Vladimir Illych are all phallic characters whose visual association with mental illness, self-destruction, guns, and penises hints at communism's veiled phallocentrism.

The film insists that, in Reichian terms, the "war of liberation" is only possible through corporal investment, but it presents woman's body as the symbolic stage for the battle between hegemony and revolt. Milena is probably the most obvious example of woman being the symbolic terrain over which male interests confront one another. She and her roommate, Jagoda are put on display in order to demonstrate how authority, oppression, liberation, violence, and sexuality are interlinked. The two young women dedicate their lives *and* bodies to Reich's cause and to communist militarism. They make love in order to keep the revolution alive. Early in the film we see Jagoda copulating with

a soldier in order to "keep him fit and happy." The camera follows the couple making love in many different positions, but it lingers on Jagoda's naked body. Cheerful folkloric music accompanies the long and elaborate sexual choreography, but the close-ups indicate that Jagoda does not enjoy herself. Her face shows boredom and neutrality after a short while, and she repeatedly tries to get away from the soldier. Presented as a playful game between the two, her repeated attempt to escape undermines Milena's claim that "it is not important whether long or short...joy is the most important."

Milena is in agreement with her friend's actions because, as she declares, "communism without free love is in the graveyard." Moreover, she states that a "hopeless woman" like her can only help the revolution by offering herself to the heroic soldiers. Yet, her offering only meets with Radmilovic's (Zoran Radmilovic) selfish sexual advances and later she is literally sacrificed on the altar of her Soviet man's perverse sexual pleasure. Neither Jagoda's boredom nor Milena's frustration and tragic fate indicate much joy in these women's (hetero)sexual encounters. Milena's character embodies the Reichian dialectics between sexual and political liberation. Her desperate anger and rebellious sexual behavior gives voice to a collective cry for the Yugoslav spirit to free itself from internal and external oppression. Yet, freely giving out her love/body to demonstrate her dedication to the revolution leads to Milena's frustration and tragedy.

Milena's torment over individual versus collective happiness is symbolic of Yugoslavia's delicate political situation in the middle of the Cold War. Under Tito's leadership in the 1950s, communist Yugoslavia tried to break away from the Stalinist Soviet control, but it also kept a critical ideological distance from the capitalist West.

Tito's idea was to create a "market socialism" that combined capitalist market economy with communist social ideology and the free market with total state control. The only country not to sign the Warsaw Pact, Yugoslavia implemented the Titoist belief that every country must find its own way to communism; in other words, socialism had to be tailored to the particular conditions of each country.

"Socialism with a human face" became the widespread policy of the Eastern European reform movements in the 1950s and 1960s. According to Tito and other leaders in Eastern European countries every society was entitled to find its independent road to socialism and to adjust ideology to the society's specific needs. The bloody repression of the 1956 revolution in Hungary and the military occupation of Czechoslovakia twelve years later demonstrate the reaction of the Soviet Union to these aspirations. Despite Tito's liberal policies, internal economic crisis was inevitable and culminated in the declaration of martial law in Kosovo. Tito's authoritarian handling of several emerging crises such as the Croatian upheaval (1971-72) showed a fundamental instability in the Yugoslav political sphere, a concern that Makavejev's film ironically alludes to in Milena's ambivalence about her dedication to the Party (sexual liberation) and her growing infatuation with the "Soviet hero."

Milena explicitly connects free sex with social revolution in a number of scenes. Probably the most important one shows her giving a speech in the hallway of her apartment about the critical role of the orgasm in communist revolution. She claims that the residents of the apartment complex, who find the two girls' intense sexual life scandalous, are hypocritical and repressed. She addresses her audience hoping to teach them that communism is unattainable without sexual freedom. The right of the individual

to orgasm is crucial, while abstinence is "unhealthy, inhuman, and what's worse…counter-revolutionary." "Abstinence is counter revolutionary!" Milena declares establishing an inherent connection between sexuality and revolution, but also linking patriarchy to hegemony. For her, *abstinence* is the triumph of ideological domination as it means a (self)exclusion from the "battle of sexes" and, consequently, from the "struggle of the classes."

Only a total and new "genital embrace," says Milena, can assist the oppressed in their revolt against "the mass marching orgasm of Nazis, bloodstream orgasm of alcoholics, cerebral orgasm of religious mystics, and muscular orgasm of athletes" meaning that sex is not only a right but also a revolutionary duty. Milena in fact scorns all men in the audience for their "political impotence" and patriarchal ignorance of women's needs. But she also criticizes the women for subjugating themselves to the Phallus, the authority of men, and the repressive system. "As revolutionaries whose revolution renounces love, we feel uncomfortable...what happened to our revolution?" she asks. Her manifesto about the organic connection between sexual and political revolution is truly Reichian by nature. As a confirmation of this statement, on the wall of her room Milena has Reich's portrait next to a photograph of Hitler surrounded by a group of admiring women. During a visit, a very shocked Vladimir Illych asks Milena about Hitler's photograph, and she explains that she keeps it to remind herself of the stupidity of women who obey male domination, and to never forget that sexual exploitation and political tyranny go hand in hand. She also goes on claiming that bourgeois marriage is a form of "legalized prostitution."

During the same conversation between Vladimir Illych and Milena about the meaning of communism, he points out that Trotsky's concept of "permanent revolution" in her ideal world would be turned into "permanent orgasm." This mockery, although it correctly targets an existing contradiction in Milena's Reichian theory (the direct and simplified link between orgasm and revolution), confirms the Soviet ice-skater's perverse logic, his complete detachment from material reality, and his need for extreme self-control and repression. The casual chatter takes place while Jagoda, who is completely naked, is trying to distract the couple by dancing nakedly on the bed. The frame again encloses the fully exposed female body with the communist revolution. But the connection between sexual and political libido established by *WR* is obviously gendered because it relies on the availability of women's naked bodies. The inherent link between individual bodies and the social collective is created through eager and readily available female bodies keen to carnivalize themselves and to fulfill male sexual and political desires. Revolution in the film ultimately depends on the free love of women, on their willingness to strip themselves and offer up their bodies in order to free the repressed male subject.

Radmilovic, whom Milena considers an example of "proletarian decadence," interrupts the "idyll" with Vladimir Illych in Milena's apartment by literally breaking through the wall (again like a tank). After closing Vladimir Illych into the closet, he vehemently accuses Milena of having a "bourgeois attitude" because a simple worker like him is not good enough for her anymore, and because she only wants to mix with the elite Party bureaucrats. At the root of his anger is a selfish frustration from having fallen out of Milena's sexual favor. On the contrary, in Vladimir Illych's eyes individual happiness

and the happiness of the people are one and the same, but communal happiness always stands at the base. He is interested in Milena mostly as an embodiment of the Yugoslav spirit and tries to convince her that the Soviet path to communism is the only viable one. Milena disagrees with both men and she powerfully asserts her own political view that communism means a sharp, sober eye, and a critical and independent mind that works like a "scalpel." According to her, a true communist's actions are "precise like a razor cut." She refuses to collapse the body and the social collective, pointing to the fact that individual satisfaction is rare in Yugoslavia. There is no social revolution without strong individual commitment and sexual desire is a form of libidinal energy that can translate into political action.

While the males intensify their intellectual and sexual pursuit, Milena's desire to find "a real/communist man" who knows "how to fight and how to fuck" remains unfulfilled. Ironically, neither Radmilovic nor Vladimir Illych are interested in loving Milena—they only want to possess her. Despite their differences, both men understand communism to be an ideal state where everything is common: the factory, the power, and the women. Radmilovic wants Milena simply for pleasure, in order as he states, "to celebrate his ejaculation praecox"—a premature orgasm with total disregard for woman's pleasure. Vladimir Illych, on the other hand, can only take Milena on an abstract, philosophical level accompanied by complete detachment from reality. He can only handle intellectual passion because any kind of physical joy or mundane pleasure means giving up total control. Vladimir Illych is not that different from Radmilovic in using Milena to remasculinize himself. While the latter wants to feel "like a man" by "fucking" Milena the Yugoslav way and hopes to regain his lost phallic power in the ailing

communist utopia, the former literally "knocks her head off": he (ab)uses and mutilates Milena's body in a moment of free, fully raging Soviet "passion." Vladimir Illych's violent behavior towards Milena at the end of the film is the result of his orgasmic outrage and pathologically repressed existence.

What I find most surprising is that Milena cannot be described as a passive bystander to her fate. In her political and sexual rebellion she objectifies herself for the male gaze and sexual desire. She is master of her body and *consciously* offers herself up for the revolutionary cause. Just like Jagoda, she puts her own body into battle against "the engine of totalitarian repression" but ends up being a tool for the masculine desire to "get off" politically as well as sexually. In one of the most circulated images of the film, she poses in front of a striped wall citing a manifesto about the sexually and politically liberated woman, who wishes "death to male fascism" and "freedom to female people." In the meantime, her body is imprisoned in the image literally and symbolically. She is trapped by the still camera and by the stripes on the wall that resemble the bars of a prison cell. The picture frame she is holding in front of her face also constrains her body and makes it fully available to our gaze. What is striking about this image is that Milena holds the frame up *for herself*—she willingly gives her body over to be framed by male fetishism. In other words, she facilitates her own objectification. Ultimately, *WR* shows the male desire to liberate itself by gazing at Milena who rebels sexually and who is openly and strongly erotic, but most importantly, who is *ready* and *keen* to sacrifice herself for the revolutionary cause.

As they take a romantic (and terminal) walk in a park, Milena cannot resist herself and passionately kisses the very passive Vladimir Illych. She is further seduced by his

revolutionary triad and tries to touch his genitals, but the Soviet skater slaps her so hard that she falls over. Milena, in her frustration and rage, hits back and accuses him of emotional incompetence, of loving all of mankind but incapable of loving one individual. Her disappointment comes with the realization that Vladimir Illych is the embodiment of empty revolutionary rhetoric. The Soviet artist is only interested in philosophical, poetical, and abstract notions of love and happiness—his discursive eloquence covers up for physical impotence and aggression. The slap is Milena's moment of understanding that Soviet love is what she calls a "toy balloon," a lie. Her angry scream that "You [Vladimir Illych] said that I am as lovely as the Revolution…you gazed at me as a picture…but the Revolution mustn't *touch*" [my emphasis] connects Milena's body directly to the revolution. But it also shows that for the Soviet hero the revolution is only a ruse, a kind of simulacra. His love only exists in words and diatribes. Milena's desperate anger is a communal rage against the deception of the communist revolution in Eastern Europe, a social utopia that existed solely on a discursive level. The moment of clarity unmasks that lofty ideology covers for state aggression, that universal rights only exist in words, and that the revolutionary promises are out of touch with reality also seals Milena's fate. Yet, despite her rage, she inexplicably offers herself to Vladimir Illych, and the lovers come together in a painful and sad embrace. While the image fades into darkness, we hear a loud scream and next we see Vladimir Illych's bloody hands in the night.

The film insists that Milena's bodily, sexual politics has a fundamental connection to the collective. She seals her own fate when, despite her apparent rebellion and her self-conscious revolutionary position, she falls in love with Vladimir Illych, the embodiment

of the phallocentric, Stalinist political ideology. Her character is built on an irreconcilable paradox, a purposefully maintained schizophrenia (the need to choose either love or revolution), which I consider phallic in itself because it denies woman the possibility of simultaneous political and romantic engagement. This paradox can only be explained in terms of a *masculine* desire that builds Milena's fate in parallel with the fate of Yugoslavia after World War II. The need to decide whether to commit herself to Vladimir Illych or satisfy her duties towards the Party (her political belief of total sexual freedom) I see relevant only within a patriarchal economy of desire. Her body is exposed and finally sacrificed as a metaphorical and visual reference to the sufferings of the "motherland." Making her an embodiment of Yugoslavia's complicated and tragic history on the path to communism forces Milena "despite herself" (she wants both freedom *and* love) into the position of a happy and willing victim.

Milena attempts to rebel against the patriarchal (hegemonic) oppression, yet ultimately she falls for the obviously violent and repressive "Soviet love." She marches to her own death by voluntarily giving in to the aggressive cravings of Vladimir Illych. The Soviet hero's sexual liberation proves to be fatal for Milena; his ejaculation requires her death. In the last scene, Milena's decapitated head appears on the doctor's table. The autopsy shows unusually huge amounts of semen in her body (4 or 5 times the normal). In a surreal scene, her talking head wraps up the film claiming that Vladimir Illych was a man of noble impetuousness, of high ambition, both romantic and ascetic… a real "Red Fascist." As her decapitated head summarizes the conclusion of the film, Milena's missing body reveals the true lessons of Yugoslavia's "love affair" with the Soviet Union. Her physical mutilation is needed to reveal the perverse and oppressive nature of

"Soviet love." She pays with her own life for trying to rebel against political oppression as well as patriarchal authority.

The claim that "even now I am not ashamed of my communist past" confirms a continuing belief in the possibility of a true socialist revolution in Eastern Europe. It is not communism per se and not patriarchal aggression in general but specifically (Soviet) "Red Fascism" that Milena's death criticizes as violently repressive. Her sad fate stands in for the failure of Yugoslavian man to free himself from imperial and dictatorial oppression. Her mutilated body becomes an ironic symbol of the country's despair under Soviet imperial violence and Tito's communist dictatorship. Her tragic death is an allegorical statement that any attempt towards a true revolution will necessarily end in "decapitation" and "castration" rather than political or social liberation.

WR moves in a limbo regarding woman's role as a political subject. Although it uses the female body as an organ of social criticism, as a mask to convey the political message, the film's iconic symbolism is still delivered in a thoroughly patriarchal way. It first takes pleasure in imagining woman as rebellious and sexy, as transgressive through her erotica, but then sacrifices her on the altar of communist imperialism only to reinvigorate masculine agency. It is significant that woman gives voice to Makavejev's radical political project. But her subjectivity is ultimately surrendered to a voyeuristic and sadistic objectification by the male gaze. Imagining woman as hypersexualized and readily available invigorates male sexual desires while it also links her body to social liberation. In other words, woman restores a lost sense of political agency in indirect and pleasing ways. The visual allegory of her carnivalized body assists the Yugoslav male subject to remasculinize himself in terms of sexual and political potency.

Sound Eroticism

Péter Tímár's film, *Sound Eroticism* (*Egészséges Erotika*, 1985) also presents voyeuristic sexual desire as the driving force towards the communist system's disintegration. Although Tímár represents a younger generation of filmmakers, his aesthetic vocabulary is heavily influenced by Eastern European New-Wave cinema. Unsuccessful at applying to the Hungarian Film Academy, he joined the famous Balázs Béla Studio (BBS) where he was responsible primarily for the editing and special effects of Gábor Bódy's movies. Bódy was the founder of BBS, which in 1961 became the cradle for Hungarian modernist and avant-garde cinema. The Studio was run on a relatively low budget and had "no obligation to exhibit" which, together with the loosening censorial control in the 1960s, made it an institutional haven for artistic experimentation without political compromises.

The aesthetic and technical education that Tímár acquired while working at BBS marked his debut full-length movie, *Sound Eroticism*. The bitter satiric tone and peculiar visual language of the film made it an instant hit with audiences. Tímár followed up his success with numerous other comedies after 1989, the most famous of which are *Double or Nothing* (*Csapd le csacsi*, 1991), *Dollybirds* (*Csinibaba*, 1996), and *Fred Zimmer* (*Zimmer Feri*, 1997). All tackle aspects of different individual, social and economic turmoil characterizing Hungary's transition to free market capitalism. Tímár's schooling in avant-garde cinema together with his strong interest in special effects and editing always produce playful, technically and linguistically complex films—often purposefully inarticulate, choppy and distorted. In an interview, the director explained his obsession with finding new ways to articulate his message as a "passion that centers on the process

of creating strange textual forms, including the exploitation of the possibilities of the visual medium to the maximum" (Ardai, my translation) that tries to enrich the interpretative process.

Sound Eroticism takes place during the 1980s in a struggling Hungarian crate factory (with only women employees) as it unenthusiastically welcomes its newly appointed security officer, the fireman Bozodi. Bozodi's first action is to place fire extinguishers full of gasoline all over the factory in order to gain a little on the side by selling it in times of gas shortage. Next, he proposes to install a hidden camera system for "security and monitoring purposes." The internal video network secretly surveys the women's dressing room as well. Watching the women change their clothes twice a day spices up the boring bureaucratic life of the factory. Moreover, it helps raise the sales numbers since voyeuristic new customers are allowed to see the women only after they have purchased enough crates. When the women discover the new "safety measures," they rebel and decide to kidnap Bozodi and the manager, Falkay and to demand one million Forints (Hungarian currency) ransom. The director of the co-op, the Party secretary, and the chief fireman try to "smoke out" the women and to free the prisoners by creating an artificial fire. But things get out of hand when they use the gasoline filled extinguishers, and the whole factory burns down. Bozodi and Falkay miraculously reemerge from the wreckage.

The aesthetic choices of *Sound Eroticism* (like *WR*) are radical and exemplary of how film form plays just as an important role in reproducing the upside-down, grotesque character of the communist system as the story does. Similarly to Makavejev, Tímár uses visual cues to describe the twisted reality. The film was shot in black and white and

backwards. The actors moved in reverse on the set and spoke their lines backwards; later, during postproduction, the footage was inverted and the voices overdubbed leaving the film bizarrely fragmented with an overall sense of weirdness, jerkiness, and being out of synch. Consequently, the characters' movements are awkwardly fumbling; the action is often interrupted by sudden cuts while the dialogues are mostly reduced to fragments and are out of synch with the actors' lips. The extradigetic music is also stripped to a set of percussion.

The artificial, exaggerated points of view further underline the subnormal and distorted character of this world. The camera-eye (kino-eye) often overrides the natural sense of sight: for instance, sometimes we see the factory yard from the position of a mosquito; other times we see the characters' actions from under a table, and again other times certain parts of the image are blurred. These modifications and reductions in both the audio and the visual field, as Tímár himself claimed, are consistent with "the utterly reduced and limited rationality" (Ardai, my translation) in the declining communist regimes all over Eastern Europe. The exaggerations in the film's audio and visual field allegorically correspond with communist reality perceived as grotesque.

The visual aesthetic validates Tímár's claim that he attempted to strip socialist reality to its bare essence by reducing the characters to social types, their language to fragments, and the film's color scale and sound to the minimum. Shooting the film backwards minimized the possibilities of bodily movement on the screen and limited the use of dialogues. This is especially true in the case of the male protagonists who usually communicate through simple words, fragments, or ungrammatical structures. Significantly, the female workers sometimes appear in "straight shots" and demonstrate

basic discursive coherence. But all characters have a perverted, non-natural position in the visual and auditory field and they are completely stagnant preventing the viewer from any empathy. Ultimately, the anomalies deprive these figures of any "anatomy" (Ardai, my translation) and reduce them to social types.

Comparing *Sound Eroticism* to *The Firemen's Ball* (Miloš Forman 1967), Gergely Bikácsy writes that

> Both films ridicule the patriarchal, paternalistic abuse of power, this social model so characteristic and so difficult to overcome in twentieth century Eastern Europe. […] Both films' fictional visions are tight and straightforward: in a society full of taboos nothing denotes what it is supposed to denote; while fire erupts the fire brigade organizes a raffle, or else they try to extinguish the flames using gasoline pipes. Their actions are not necessarily out of cruelty, but they have long gotten used to the fact that words and notions don't correspond to their original meanings anymore; the men have even forgotten the primary, innate sense of words, and cannot remember it even in case of an emergency. [my translation] (Bikácsy 6)

The grotesque comedies in Eastern European cinema react to the above-described language driven simulacra of communist reality, bringing to the surface the absurd discrepancy between word and meaning, between communist ideology and material reality. *Sound Eroticism* and *The Firemen's Ball* (and to a certain extent *WR*) share the critical revelation that communism was unavoidably heading towards self-annihilation due to the widening gap between official and nonofficial reality. When one woman in *Sound Eroticism* declares: "Where a fireman appears fire will follow soon!" her words describe to the films' carnivalesque world, where cause and effect are reversed. The statement also refers to the overabundance of bureaucratic control, the precisely organized leisure time, and the haphazard, illogical regulations, which all contributed to communism's self-consuming doom. Last but not least, both movies hint at the

patriarchal and voyeuristic nature of communist reality by staging woman as the main target and victim of political exploitation and repression.

Pornography and communism had more in common than one might imagine. The success of pornography lies in the fact that illusions of pleasure on the screen are enough to generate *real* desires in the viewer. Similarly, the production of communist reality relied on a well-maintained discursive illusion. Péter Esterházy in his collection of fictional anecdotes, *Little Hungarian Pornography* (*Kis magyar pornográfia,* 1984) poignantly shows the pornographic allure of communist excitation: one fakes reality well enough to believe it is true. The world of *Sound Eroticism* is pornographic in this same sense—its male protagonists maintain their own hegemonic position through controlling the *images* of women instead of the actual conditions over which they have no power.

From the very beginning, woman is established in the film as an object for the male gaze. In the opening scene before the credits, we see a female worker standing on the windowsill and cleaning the window in the manager's office. In the meantime Falkay is preoccupied with trying to peek under her skirt with the help of a mirror. Even though she stands right in front of him, Falkay only has access to the woman's visual representation, which however is enough to evoke pornographic excitement in him. It is not her, but her *image* that is at the core of Falkay's desire. The rule of "only looking and never touching" is held up throughout the rest of the film presenting the factory as a perverse simulacrum built on the blunt exposition of the female body and the unquestioned right of men to peek (but only to peek) at woman's image multiplied by mirrors, low quality video cameras, and TV screens.

The film mocks the common and often unproductive scientific inquires conducted by the socialist state as well as the shameless despotism of the ruling political elite. The narrative introduces a Party sociologist, who comes to the factory to conduct a survey about the sexual habits of the socialist woman—an absurd form of communist state surveillance. The "materialist libido research" is an invasive scientific account of the female body, an example of the illogical measures with which the socialist state interpellated and controlled its subjects. The state "watching over" its people was supposed to help the system adjust itself to people's needs, but in fact it only perpetuated the already existing sense of surveillance and abusive control. Falkay is more than keen to help in gathering the survey data, to the extent that he personally collects the questionnaires filled by the women and reads them later in his office. Since they are anonymous, he tries to match the handwritings on the survey to the women's signatures on file.

Yet, the statistic evaluation of woman's most intimate sexual behavior is not simply a form of state scrutiny—it is a specifically masculine undertaking. It is men who think up, organize, examine, interpret, and enjoy the results of the inquiry. The official survey conducted by the Party works very similarly to the video system installed in the women's locker room suggesting a parallel between repressive state hegemony and patriarchal domination. Men literally embody the perversion of the system—its voyeurism, its scrutiny, its aggression, and its exploitation. But the critical allegory stays within a traditional frame, since women in this economy of power have no control over their bodies and their rebellion against the patriarchal exploitation will ultimately fail. The allegory of pornographic voyeurism exposes the different ways in which the

communist totalitarian system exploited its subjects. Yet, it also reproduces the same exploitation when it puts forth woman's body as the tool for political revolt. The film shows woman's body to be the experimental field for communist ideology, but at the same time it also sacrifices her image to male voyeuristic desires.

The women worker's fate is a useful allegory for the absurdities of late-communism, but their bodies serve as a terrain for all evils of the system to be visualized and expressed. One worker for instance, cannot hand over the filled questionnaire to Falkay because her husband beat her up and tore it apart when he realized what she was doing. Yet, the boss could not care less about what has happened to her; he is only interested in having the results back. He gets angry because what happened prevents him from being able to read *her* response. Falkay's inhumane, selfish disinterest towards the woman worker is symptomatic of a general abuse of power. However, the film completely ignores the husband's cruel treatment of his wife; for the sake of mocking the arrogance of communist power it presents domestic abuse as normal, nothing to be concerned about.

The division of power is set up in obviously gendered ways: all bosses and Party officials are men—in other words, all positions of power are occupied by male subjects; at the same time, the workers exploited are all women. By controlling the women, the masculine subjects attempt to hold onto their hegemonic position in the disintegrating grotesque world of late-communism. The male characters embody the stupidity, violence, and failure of the hegemonic order. The images of the naked, unguarded women cause perverse arousals in the macho and male chauvinistic men, who become more and more addicted to the "show," to a point where the sole purpose of their existence in the factory

is to watch the TV screen. Since these women are in full control of the labor force on which the factory depends, the men's voyeuristic indulgence becomes a form of revenge. Failing to control the strong and independent women sheds light on the men's own redundancy in the factory. Just like the system that they represent, the men compensate for their inadequacies by using the cameras as a form of virtual power to dominate.

The men bond over the naked images of the unsuspecting women. They establish and maintain patriarchal hegemony through the surveillance system. Although Falkay at first begrudges the intrusion of the fireman into his peaceful life at the factory, once the surveillance system is in place they become the strongest of allies. The two together manage to please the irritable co-op director with their "invention." They also invite Falkay's friend, the veterinarian to join them making it a daily ritual to watch the women change before and after work. Later, the director of a liquor factory joins the group, but this time the goal is not merely to please, but also to put the images to "good use"—to sell more crates. They push up the sales number by controlling the images: they only allow the customers to watch the video if they commit to buying a certain number of crates. The crates are quickly disappearing from the factory yard and the men collectively profit from exploiting the women.

Falkay is probably the best example of how the male subject benefits from the carnivalized staging of the female body. Every time he watches the women on the internal TV system he starts to shake a cup of yogurt excitedly and uncontrollably. His repeated symbolic masturbation with the white liquid speaks volumes about a desire to display masculine potency in a world that curtails any attempt for individual agency. Falkay's hilarious simulation compensates for his real sexual and political impotence. His

libidinal desire for phallic power completely repressed by the totalitarian system channels itself in this miserable way. Masturbating with a cup of yogurt to the naked images of his workers is Falkay's pathetic way of remasculinizing himself—to re/acquire his lost phallic position—in a world that makes his existence utterly useless. The charm of *Sound Eroticism* lies in its ability to ridicule the impotence of its masculine subjects as symptomatic of communist reality. But it can only achieve this through a full surrender of woman to the perverse and phallic voyeurism of the camera.

The imaginary remasculinization and male bonding achieved through the gaze is also evident in Bozodi's delight over having access to the naked image of an unruly worker. Bozodi, who is repeatedly rejected and ridiculed by her, finally gets to "touch" the disobedient worker—if only on the screen—and to scrutinize her naked body. His desire to dominate and regulate her is apparent in his longing gaze. The rebellious woman's naked image provides an imaginary access to what is inaccessible to Bozodi in reality: her body and subordination. "Touching" her on the screen, undressing her virtually allows Bozodi to finally think of himself as a "man" and to restore his heavily compromised phallic power. A false sense of sexual domination compensates for his powerlessness in the political order.

The correspondence between the male figures of authority and the communist hegemonic powers reflects critically both on patriarchal and state domination. However, there are several indicators that ultimately the "joke is on the woman" in the film. Women do the actual work in the factory making crates all day long while the men spend their days shifting papers around, giving orders and watching the surveillance system. The "success" of socialist state production depends on woman's monotonous labor.

However, this labor is devoid of meaning: the crates are useless, they are not sold but simply piled up all over the factory yard. Although woman is the only supplier of labor in the film, her labor is rendered useless and ultimately destroys what it produces. Woman's work stands in for communist labor in general and it is presented as utterly futile. Her labor is used to show the paradoxical relationship between production and consumption in planned economies and to display the incongruence between people's needs and the products available to them.

The fact that the crates have no use or exchange value by themselves underlines the twisted logic of the socialist market. The men's decision to attach the crates to the naked images of the female workers in order to increase their sale numbers discloses strongly patriarchal understanding of the value of woman: her work as well as her body is useless unless it serves male sexual and political interests. The success of the factory depends *not* on the hard labor of these female bodies but on their naked imagery. The woman's sexualized body adds value to her labor; her everyday toil becomes meaningful and productive only when attached to the pornographic exhibition of her stripped body.

Herbert Marcuse's statement that "libidinal relations are essentially antagonistic to work relations" (154) finds a curious counter-argument in the film. Libidinal energy, woman's erotic appeal that is, is shown to *help* labor relations instead of undermining them. *Sound Eroticism* contradicts Marcuse's argument that there is no libidinal pleasure in work because in the film women's alienated labor turns into a source of joy for man. By watching her work and disrobe, man's work achieves a "high degree of satisfaction, which is pleasurable in its execution" (84). Through the naked female body, *Sound Eroticism* achieves what is impossible in Marcuse's view: "the [cruel] transformation of

labor into pleasure" (217). Man's work is finally pleasant *and* meaningful because the female body has eroticized it. However, woman has no control or agency in this process, in fact she is not even aware that it is happening.

The factory's secretary is probably the best example of how the film relies on and exploits its female subjects to reveal the atrocious abusiveness of the communist establishment. Due to the nature of her work, the secretary is the only woman in the film with access to the masculine field of power. Despite or exactly because of this, she is ignored and mocked by her bosses and presented as intrusive and dumb. She is inexplicably in love with Bozodi who talks to her only when he needs help. Her unreciprocated feelings cause frustrations in the secretary, but this annoys the men even more, and so they insult her whenever they can. Falkay calls her "office bitch [irodista némber]." When later, at the factory's anniversary dinner, she tries to flirt with the director of the co-op, he asks, "who made *this one* sit next to me? [ki ültette *ezt* ide mellém?]" The secretary's vein effort to attain agency in the male dominated world is emphasized by the film's language as well. Sitting at the dinner table she is enclosed in the same frame with the director (all other women sit at a different table), but her image is blurred and pushed to the background, while the director is in focus stuffing himself, ignoring her chat, and finally getting annoyed by "this one" whom he considers an irritating object rather than a human being.

It is all too ironic that while the secretary is the only body actually available for the men, as she alone wants to be part of the masculine world of power (as opposed to the other workers who want nothing to do with the bosses), she instigates only repulsion and anger. The patriarchal world, like the communist one, is not interested in any "real"

(female) subjects, in their flesh and blood existence. Like the communist power, patriarchy ignores the reality of the female subject, and instead it dwells in easily manipulated, pornographic illusions. Like communist ideology, the men create perverse fantasies with no bearing on reality, fantasies that keep them in control and remasculinize them in a reality that does not allow for it. In its male characters, *Sound Eroticism* shows and mocks the voyeurism of the totalitarian state, but it can only do so by ultimately reproducing the voyeurism of the male gaze.

The women's strike provides a short, cathartic moment in the film and a brief sense of redemption. Surprisingly, when they find out about the cameras, the workers are not worried about having been morally compromised or abused. They approach the injustice in pragmatic ways: since it is impossible to change what has happened—the damage is already done—they want to benefit from the unauthorized images and have their fair share in the business. "Selling their bodies" is not a moral question for them, and so they demand one million Forints as compensation. This attitude, quite far from the Western, moralistic feminist approach, reminds one of a need to reinterpret Eastern European feminism in light of švejkism—an amoral strategy of survival and endurance in impossibly absurd and paralyzing circumstances.

The women's disregard for morality sheds light on the hypocrisy of the Communist Party's ideology. They refuse to attack the men on moral grounds, which makes the moralizing Party officials even more corrupt. The Party's secretary attempts to explain "logically" why monetary demands and rebellion are *immoral*: the women cannot be paid because in the socialist state the body is not a source of profit; it has no monetary value. While apparently it was not immoral for men to take advantage of the women, the

Party official now claims that it is immoral to compensate the women for using their sexualized bodies. The statement uses the very same moral argument to validate the women's exploitation and condemns their attempt to seek compensation. It discloses a double standard in the communist order whereby the men are allowed to possess, use, sell, and profit from these images but the women are deprived of ownership of their own representations. In principle, the body is not a commodity in the socialist utopia. However, in practice everything is for sale in this world; morality is replaced by corruption and the female body is nothing but a fetish object for the men. Communist ideology's claims over reality are reproduced once again to contradict the facts of life, which—as I have argued throughout—results in a growing void that would eventually bring about the demise of the system.

The central female character, the rebellious woman is fully aware of this absurd schizophrenia when she says: "they sold us" ["árultak bennünket"], resonating closely with "they betrayed us." Yet, her comrades are unreceptive to her fury over the above-described betrayal, and in a heartbreaking moment we see them apathetically walk away from the strike accepting the fact of their exploitation. The unruly woman, abandoned in the factory, is the most obvious victim of the film's phallocentric vision. She opposes the bosses from the beginning when she refuses to fill out the questionnaire and resists Bozodi's repeated advances. She is also the one who discovers the cameras and organizes the kidnapping plot and the strike. When the others abandon her during the factory strike, the heroic moment of liberation, the potential for woman to acquire real agency over her own body is destroyed. As the factory burns down, the last hope for the women to revenge themselves is lost. This failure is symbolic of the fate of female solidarity when

facing an all-encompassing and utterly corrupt system. Ironically, as the women's hope perishes in the fire, Bozodi and Falkay miraculously reemerge from the smoking rubble. Hence, instead of celebrating and validating the women's attempt at political resistance, the film sacrifices the uncompromising female subject. The fate of the unruly woman is symptomatic of how female political agency is surrendered to a more general, allegorical statement about the self-instigated demise of communism.

The apocalyptic ending of the film indicates an unstoppable decline due to the self-destructive nature of communism in Eastern Europe. The final scene shows the factory as it is completely consumed by the fire because the officials decide to ask the chief fireman to "smoke out" the women by instigating a combustion that they later cannot contain. Similarly to *The Firemen's Ball*, in the upside down world of *Sound Eroticism*, fire fighters instead of putting out the fire *generate* it. This distorted rationale is allegorical of communist reality's visible contradictions and perversions by the 1980s that caused its slow but unstoppable corrosion.

Tímár pushes his humorous and dark commentary about communist existence even further when he does not end the film with the image of the burning factory. Instead, by reintroducing the sociologist in the end, he brings the mockery full circle, denying any possibility of cathartic cleansing. While Bozodi and Falkay lie burnt and exhausted near an ambulance, the Party scientist reappears with new pile of questionnaires and proposes yet another statistical research about the female factory workers. We can only regard the sociologist's presence in the disastrous circumstances as completely absurd. However, his perverted plans, which ignore the disaster and go on with business as usual, gain meaning

if understood as a metaphorical reference to the obliviousness of the communist state to the reality on the ground.

Sound Eroticism mocks the idiocy of small despots who desperately clung onto their limited and insignificant bureaucratic powers. The understanding (clear by 1985) that really existing communism in Eastern Europe was doomed due to its inherent contradictions often produced a perverse reaction, a sadistic control on part of the ruling political elite. The film reproduces the last stages of socialist decadence, where even language broke down, appearances ceased to matter anymore, and the system's perverse logic slowly came to the surface showing its true, grotesque face before it went down in flames. It also draws a parallel between the sexual perversion of its male protagonists and the distortions of communist reality. But *Sound Eroticism* uses woman as a prey for a critical agenda to unveil the perverse nature of the 1980s political regime. The sole focus of the cinematic gaze is woman: the video cameras inside the story, the male characters, the film camera as well as the viewer in the cinema obsessively follow her from dressing room to the factory hall and back as she goes on with her daily, monotonous routine. The illusionary domination over woman's naked body is what excites all men in the film. The perverse voyeuristic pleasure of the male gaze allegorically reveals the pornographic ways in which communist hegemony sustained its power.

The film comedies often utilize woman as a primary site to express dissent to the communist state's ideological oppression, voyeuristic surveillance and exploitation. It is her nude and sexualized body that provides the critical prism necessary to unveil the abusive and absurd nature of really exiting communism. Abusive voyeurism creates a symbolic keyhole through which the male gaze constructs woman as the primary victim

of the perversion inherent in the political system—the voyeuristic abusiveness of Party bureaucracy and the constant surveillance and spying institutionalized so deeply in Eastern Europe. But more often than not it is the masculine subject who boosts his authority (limited by the despotic and autocratic political system) through the patriarchal pleasures found in controlling women's bodies.

Other Examples of Cinematic Patriarchy in Eastern European Film Comedies

The multilayered montage technique of *WR* that facilitates free association and the reversed, backwards cinematography of *Sound Eroticism* exemplify the political and aesthetic choreographies characterizing the grotesque in Eastern European cinema. They critique the political system through the language of sexuality. In what follows, I will briefly discuss a few other examples that locate woman as a symbolic marker of dissent, a site where the male subject can contest repressive political power.[38]

After a series of highly successful films such as *Closely Watched Trains* (*Ostre sledované vlaky*, Jiří Menzel, 1966), which won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1967 and *Capricious Summer* (*Rozmarné léto*, 1968) which won the Grand Prix Prize at Karlovy Vary, Jiři Menzel's third Bohumil Hrabal adaptation, *Larks on a String* (*Skriváncі na niti*, 1968) had a very different fate in the history of Czech cinema. Despite Menzel's national and international success, *Larks on a String* was never allowed to leave the Barrandov Studios where it was produced. The film was shelved because of censorship until 1990, after the collapse of communism. Moreover, as a result

[38] Other relevant films on this topic that I have no space to discuss here include: *Sexmission* (*Seksmisja*, Juliusz Machulski, 1984), *Atomic War Bride* (*Rat*, Veljko Bulajić, 1960), *Capricious Summer* (*Rozmarné léto*, Jiří Menzel, 1968), *Dasies* (*Sedmikrásky*, Věra Chytilová, 1966), and *Eva Wants to Sleep* (*Ewa chce spac*, Tadeusz Chmielewski, 1958).

of the banning, Menzel was prohibited from working in the film industry well into the 1970s. Although he continued working steadily in theater, his next film, *Who Looks for Gold* (*Kdo hledá zlaté dno*) came out as late as 1974. The historical moment of the film's production and its planned release help us understand the dangers that *Larks on a String* presented to the communist state. Menzel began making the film in 1968, a time of economic/political self-reflection and self-criticism, which were instrumental in sparking internal reforms in the Czechoslovak communist regime. However, the Prague Spring, which happened in parallel with the making of *Larks on a String,* was short lived—it was suddenly and brutally interrupted by the USSR's invasion of the country. So, too was the distribution of Menzel's brilliant satiric allegory about the absurd nature of communist totalitarianism.

The film takes place in 1948-1949 when, in light of the Communist Party's new policies, all "uselees, bourgeois capitalist elements" were put to manual labor to create space for the workers to be promoted to managerial and bureaucratic positions. In a steel junkyard, the Professor, the Public Prosecutor, the Saxophone player, the Milkman, and the Barber are forced to separate and rearrange the incoming junk steel. They work alongside a group of female convicts. The two groups try to establish contact under the strict supervision of a prison guard. The most obvious sign of their attraction is a blossoming love between Pavel, the cook (again played by Václav Neckár) and Jitka, a female prisoner (Jitka Zelenohorská). The fact that they can rarely meet, talk to or touch each other under the strict surveillance only increases the erotic desire, and finally the two decide to get married. But the marriage presents difficulties from the beginning: they have to complete the wedding ceremony separately through proxy. Despite repeated

attempts, they are also unable to consummate their love. Just before a final group effort to organize a "nuptial rendezvous" for the newlyweds, Pavel is deported for illicit political activities. His crime is that earlier he asked the visiting minister to reveal the whereabouts of the Milkman and the Professor who had mysteriously disappeared.[39] The film ends with Jitka's determination to wait for Pavel. After she is freed she starts working in the prison where he is transferred to do forced labor in the mines.

The world that *Larks on a String* depicts is highly grotesque. The life and work in the steel junkyard makes the characters useless as they stand on the absolute margins of society. Most women are sentenced to prison because they tried to flee the country, while the men are there for being "foreign elements" and "political enemies" to the communist system. In one scene, we follow a conversation amongst the men about their future and the possibility of organized resistance. Their talk is intercut with playful and erotic images of two women prisoners fondling and kissing each other. The parallel cut between the seemingly unrelated images suggests a link between the desire for discursive, ideological liberation and sexual, orgasmic liberation. Later, the union representative, while trying to persuade the workers to give up their strike, suddenly becomes distracted by a few women prisoners standing nearby. To convey its political criticism, the film associates ideology with sexuality and posits them in a strong binary. It shows the first to be repressive, hegemonic and destructive, while the second to be a source of resistance

[39] Menzel admitted that the inspiration for this recurring element of disappearance in the film was a well known Eastern European joke, which goes as follows: The minister comes for a visit to the factory and gives a speech about the bright future and prosperity in Communism. A worker interrupts him shouting, "But where is our bread? Where is the milk? Where is the butter?" The minister answers something about the need for patience and the promises of the future. Next year he comes for a visit again and gives the same speech about the wellbeing of Communism. A worker interrupts him again, "But where is our bread? Where is the milk? Where is the butter? And where is the worker who interrupted you last year?"

and liberation. However, this opposition is false because the male gaze exploits the sexualized female body as a tool to engage the sphere of the political.

Despite their isolation, the men and the women find subtle ways of making physical and emotional contact; they find fulfillment in flirting secretly with each other. Erotically charged scenes showing hands touching, couples hugging, the women's hand stroking the men's faces or men and women standing close together around the fire in the pouring rain are clear moments of joy in the monotony of forced labor. These instances of erotic eruption bring warmth to the body in the cold winter days and symbolize the only form of resistance available to the prisoners to fight subjugation and oppression. Erotica in the film signifies an essential connection between the body and the state, its libidinal energy transforms into a force to resist hegemonic repression.

Nevertheless, political perversion violates the female body in the film. In a short but powerful subplot involving a Party bureaucrat, political compliance is linked to pedophilic sexual desires. The bureaucrat appears three different times in the film visiting and lecturing a group of gypsy children about bodily hygiene. Each time we find out a little more about the mysterious visits. First, we only see the bureaucrat outside the house giving out candies to the excited children. The second time we see him go into the house and disappear behind the door. The third time the scene reveals what happens behind the door: an adolescent gypsy girl is awaiting him, naked in a bathtub. The man rolls up his sleeves and starts washing the girl while talking about the importance of cleanliness. The girl's mother is aware that what is happening is inappropriate, so she calls the policeman to bring justice. However, the policeman, a dedicated father of six, instead of arresting the Party bureaucrat, gladly joins him in his pedophilic play. The scene ends with the two

men washing the young gypsy girl's naked body. Their sexual abuse is symptomatic of the underlying perversion of the political order. But at the same time, the girl's body is also sacrificed in order to unveil the abusive nature of totalitarian power. The scene reveals how cinema's radical message is often imbedded in thoroughly patriarchal visual structures.

Miloš Forman's first, quietly subversive film, *Black Peter* (*Cerný Petr*, 1964) also tackled questions of sexual and political awakening in the early 1960s. Peter (Ladislav Jakim) is a typical teenager: cynical, quiet, and disinterested except when it comes to girls. The lack of direction in his life is indicated by his first day at work in a grocery store where he mistakenly follows around a suspicious man all day long trying to find out if he is a thief or not. Peter's only interest is in his blossoming relationship with a girl, whom he accompanies to the beach, to a dancing party, and with whom he goes on a "real date." Despite his endless curiosity about the female body, Peter cannot initiate any successful physical contact with her. While struggling with boring everyday life, failed romantic affairs, and overwhelming sexual desire, he also has to face teenage machismo, and to deal with his overly protective and overbearing parents.

In one scene, we see Peter in a pub drinking a beer with a friend. The two intensely discuss a fantasy about "setting the world on fire" in order to watch scared, naked women running around. The teenagers' desire to turn the world upside down is shown to be sexually motivated. Peter's political rage is inseparable from his sexual cravings. His fantasies and obsessions are seemingly naïve, but they drive him to disobedience and persistence. He is silent most of the time (there is very little dialogue in the whole film), but this silence is purposeful. His teenage resistance carries the seeds of

a possible revolution; it can be interpreted as the Eastern European version of the 1960s beatnik generation: harmless and depressed momentarily, but potentially raging and dangerous.

Black Peter is a tale of sexual awakening that uses the language of the body to tell a story about the political awakening of a new, younger generation in communist Eastern Europe. Although sweet and overall innocent, Peter is "black" precisely because his quiet, withdrawn behavior encompasses a potential for revolt and resistance. He manifests the symptoms of a hidden but intractable desire for social and political change. But the agitators, the instigators of Peter's quiet resistance are erotic images of women created by his imagination and transmitted to the viewer through the affect of a male desiring gaze. Naked women, free love, sexual experimentation—the only things that preoccupy his imagination— ultimately stimulate Peter to slowly open his wings and personify a "new age" in Eastern European history—the 1960s.

Forman's other movie, *Loves of a Blonde* (*Lásky jedné plavovlásky*, 1966) also carries subtle comments about naïveté, hope, isolation, and disillusionment in both romance and politics. The story is set in a newly industrialized factory settlement, in rural isolation. The ratio between men and women is out of balance (16 women to every man) due to the nature of the production—shoes. To bring some color to the women workers' dull lives, the manager decides to organize a party and escorts a group of soldiers from a nearby military base. By doing so he ultimately hopes to lift up the working morale. But the young women are quickly disappointed when they see that their dancing partners are mostly middle aged men, married, and with beer bellies. In the context of Eastern European communism, where work—the main communal force—was supposed to be the

most important constituent of subjectivity, sexual satisfaction had to be controlled and monitored closely by political institutions. The manager, a representative of the paternal state, overlooks every moment of the women's lives including their sexual affairs. The women's libido for him is important in as much as it helps generating individuals who are content with their lives, and raising production rates.

Another example of the state's attempt to control female sexuality is embodied by a woman representative of the Party who lectures the female workers the day after the party about the communist woman's correct social behavior. The female official specifically refers to the protagonist Andulka's (Hana Brejchová) flirting with the piano player who came from Prague to entertain the workers. After the pianist's insistence and his romantic promises she ends up in his room. Despite her lack of experience and obvious shyness, she eventually gives herself over to the charming but somewhat forceful man. The next day he returns to Prague. Her romantic feelings make Andulka follow the piano player to Prague, where she hopes to reunite with him. But when she arrives to the indicated address, she is quickly disillusioned by the reality: the pianist still lives with his parents and he had no serious intentions with her; he was only seduced her at the party. Finally, she returns to the dormitory embarrassed and disillusioned. Andulka's story connects naïve romanticism to utopian political fantasies. Her misbehavior and romantic idealism becomes a form of resistance, but one that is crushed by cruel reality. Her unfulfilled fantasy corresponds to the communist discursive fabrication that insists on a rosy and utopian vision of the future despite the disappointing realities of the present. Woman's emotional and sexual naïveté and her disappointment are staged here to indicate a symbolic disillusionment with the unfulfilled promises of communism. Her

mundane loss of virginity stands in for the deflowering of the early communist hopes that led to the 1960s reform movements.

Conclusions

The grotesque element in Eastern European film comedies discloses a specific gender configuration. Monique Tschofen summarizes this system as one where "the personal is steep with political meaning, sexual relations become a way of waging war, and the woman's body is a battlefield: a territory to be scouted, fought over, and possessed, a fertile semiotic field upon which layers of meaning can be projected" (Tschofen 506). The discourse of sexuality replaces political discourse assisting the comedies in tackling questions otherwise untouchable. Concepts such as desire, repression, the gaze, liberation, and satisfaction enter into productive dialogues with critical-political notions such as liberty, oppression, surveillance, and denial. Hence, the language of female erotica is useful to indirectly and somewhat safely describe and criticize the restrictive, authoritative political system and to express the aggravation of those having to live with(in) it.

The films discussed in this chapter merge the language of the body with the language of politics. Yet, it is a specifically *gendered* sexuality that subverts, supersedes, or supplants the various forms of state violence. The repression, perversion, and frustration of female bodies acquire a double-entendre, while the desire for sexual satisfaction—exclusively available to men—stands in for to a desire for political and ideological liberation. But the carnivalesque subversion of the communist hierarchies

happens in a thoroughly patriarchal setting that constructs a male gaze and objectifies the female image to convey its critique.

Sexuality and the release of libidinal energies translate into the Marcusian force of Eros (Marcuse 205) in the films: the drive for freedom goes beyond the sexual libido and becomes a political drive. But it is important to realize something that is often taken for granted in Eastern Europe's cultural imagination—that woman's body is the primary instrument for male political rebellion. As Elisabeth Grosz states, it is woman who provides the "surface of libidinal and erotogenic intensity, a product of and material to be further inscribed and re-inscribed by social norms, practices, and values" (Grosz 138). Man replaces his "missing penis," his phallic power trimmed by the socialist state with cinematic *fetishism*. Through the gaze he turns his "lack" into a pleasurable fixation on the female body that he controls through the camera.

Grotesque humor and erotic imagery in the films undeniably stage what Paul Levi calls "the eruption of enjoyment in the [communist] social sphere" (85). The sexualized female body serves as a balm for the collective traumas of totalitarian repression. It is an attempt to revolutionalize the public imagination against despotism and hegemonic control. The semiotic of sexuality in the film comedies corresponds to the semiotic of political critique, but this happens within a strong patriarchal tradition that allows male political castration to compensate and to heal through woman's rebellious body. The impotence and aggression of most male characters corresponds to the violent nature of communist ideology. However, only female desire is constantly denied and the female body is sacrificed to represent the communal uproar and the urge for liberation.

It is important to recognize that the "enjoyment *despite*" offered by the comedies indeed subverts surplus repression, a binding characteristic of communist ideology. But woman disappears as a flesh and blood subject from these films; there is no space for her to exist as an active agent of political mockery and resistance. The pleasure of imaginary resistance still comes in form of a male gaze, which scrutinizes, dissects and eroticizes the female body. Woman in the Eastern European cultural imaginary is erased as a flash and blood mediator of political resistance and is redrawn as pure simulacrum caught in a "whirling sea of male configurations [...] a silent, mutable, head-less, desireless spatial surface necessary only for *his* metamorphosis" (Jardine 217). What Teresa Brennan called the "affect" of liberation is transmitted to the viewer through the naked/sexualized female body: she is the receptacle of man's bodily fluids, desires and frustrations; she is the physical conduit of the transgressive, carnivalesque release. It is the logos of the female flesh that speaks about the longing for transgression, freedom, and revolt through its "erotic energy [...] composed of fleshly codes that parallel those of language" (Brennan 145). The particular sexualization of the female body in Eastern European film comedies ultimately reinforces patriarchal hegemony as it strives to liberate only its male subjects and exploits woman in order to mock political repression in rather pleasurable ways.

Epilogue

The Postcommunist Legacy of the Grotesque Film Comedy

In 1989 I was thirteen years old. I was old enough to have clear and intense memories about our life under communism. Likewise, I was old enough to realize the crazy ruse of communist propaganda. I realized the contradiction between the lack of toilet paper and toothpaste at home and spending the day locked up in a freezing theater to watch young communists compete for the best performance that celebrated the achievements of Ceaușescu's system. I was old enough to escape with some friends from the building through the back door and to be aware and proud of what I had committed: a small act of defiance. However, I was not old enough yet to understand the larger issues of how communist ideology sustained itself for fifty years or of what brought it down eventually.

In the early 1990s, during my high school and university years, I knew that classical European cinema was viewed as basic to an intellectual's education. Yet, the television and film clubs, attended by most students regularly, also screened comedies by Péter Bacsó, Péter Tímár, Dušan Makavejev, Jiří Menzel, Miloš Forman, Juliusz Machulski and many others made during communist times. These comedies, for some reason, were immensely popular amongst us, a younger generation. We exchanged and copied them repeatedly and watched them so many times that we knew the lines by heart and would quote them to each other as a form of joke-telling. Later, when I chose to study culture as my profession and started my PhD at Stony Brook University, one professor gave me a piece of crucial advice: for your dissertation, choose a topic that is

close to your heart, that you are really interested in and *want* to investigate. I took the advice to heart when I remembered a question that has been puzzling me ever since my teenage years: Why after the collapse of communism did many film comedies from this era retain their popularity? What, for my parents' and for my generation, spoke to us in them?

Well, the bad news is that the direction of my thinking changed considerably while writing the dissertation, and the final product does not directly address my initial predicament. A satisfactory explanation of the films' popularity after 1989 required research into aspects of the film industry, distribution, and reception that I simply did not have the means or the time to do yet.[40] Without such research, despite my own convictions, which I share with most Eastern Europeans I know, it was impossible to simply assume that the films are still popular today and to build a whole dissertation on this assumption.

But there is good news too: the eventual outcome of the work revealed something even more interesting about cinema's power under communism to signal early on the irresolvable contradictions within the communist system that would eventually lead to its demise. I have explored several aspects of how Eastern European cinema used a specific comic modality to transform the complicated historical and ideological paradoxes of communist life into legible and laughable matter. Their absurd humor brought to light the existing breech between communist ideology and material reality. Through a nostalgic and comic rendering of the past the films challenged the state's attempt to gain a monopoly over public memory. They indicated the failure of the state to control its

[40] There are scattered hints about the comedies' popularity in Pobłocki, Talarczyk, Mărculescu, and Sotirova.

bodies and interpellate them successfully as socialist subjects by offering an alternative heroic model that better fit the parameters of communist reality and by positioning the sexualized female body as rebellious and unruly.

Ultimately, I argued that the comedies provided a second, carnivalesque world that mirrored official culture in a grotesque way and ridiculed it, and as such they indicated the failure of the Grand Narrative of Communism. The films constituted a much-needed alternative public sphere, where the controversies and absurdities of the dominant social structures could emerge in a critical light. I also showed that this modality is not exclusive to the communist era but stretches back to the Austro-Hungarian era (with švejkism) and forward into Postcommunist times. After 1989, a whole new wave of comedies emerged that relied on the same comic vocabulary to address the paradoxes of capitalist hegemony. The number and popularity of grotesque film comedies in the region confirms a more general argument that humor has been an important and enduring weapon for Eastern Europeans who had very few other ways to deal with and interpret what they perceived as their alienation from history. This comic modality has become a permanent part of the region's cultural vocabulary and has been passed down from generation to generation and helped each one when it tried to deal with its own particular frustrations.

In conclusion, therefore I want to make an effort to put forward an educated guess, a hypothesis about what might be at work behind the continuing legacy of grotesque realism in Postcommunist Eastern Europe. I believe that if one is to fully understand the genre's importance, it is imperative to scrutinize not only the comedies' relevance in the past but also in the present. In addition, I want to briefly touch on the

influence of this representational mode in contemporary Eastern European culture by pointing to the existence of a new wave of grotesque comedy and by exploring its prevalence in the new, capitalist world. In fact, I believ that in some ways the explanation of the genre's sustained popularity and the appearance of a new wave of comedies is embedded in the dissertation itself.

Undeniably, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the end of communism and the Cold War brought about dramatic political, economic and cultural changes in Eastern Europe. The films I investigated in the dissertation reference life under communism closely, so in Marxian terms their relevance and appeal should have withered away with the disappearance of communism and the emergence of "free" capitalist democracy. Instead, however, after the fall of communism many films became cult classics, widely circulated and appreciated amongst younger and older audiences. Moreover, the tradition of Eastern European grotesque film comedy still flourishes in the region. If the political system that these films criticized has vanished, what exactly does the audience relate to and see as pertinent in them? Despite what seems to be a radical makeover, is it possible that the changes were not so fundamental after all?

To put it bluntly, grotesque comedy has continued to resonate in Eastern Europe's cultural imaginary because the conditions that fostered it have not completely disappeared. The films' popularity after 1989 was due to the shortcomings Eastern Europeans suffered during the transition to the new capitalist system. The absurd incongruity between ideology and reality still persisted in the region; the nostalgic remembering of communism defied the official celebrations of capitalism as a "return to history;" grotesque heroism as a survival strategy was appealing to the collective

imaginary; and women's cultural images continued to assist masculine self-empowerment. Watching the old films triggered laughter in the viewers who lived through communism reminding them not only of the absurdities of the past but also of the present. The films' cult status sends us a critical signal that new imagined communities of resistance are emerging within capitalist hegemony as well.

The understanding of the past, according to Slavoj Žižek, is always already "overdetermined" (1991:202); it is *seen* from the point of view of the present. Therefore, "if the trace of an old encounter all of a sudden begins to exert impact [...] it is because the *present* symbolic universe of the subject is structured in a way that is susceptible to it" (ibid). To put Žižek's words into our particular context, if the grotesque comedies from the communist era appear relevant today, it is not simply because the region still lingers under the weight of its recent history.

My sense is that the films' sustained popularity comes from their power to evoke familiar structures from the past that we can deploy in contemporary reality. Probably the most important of these is a gap between ideological discourse and lived reality in (over)determining the new, capitalist order as well. Martin Esslin noted in his seminal work on the theater of the absurd that language in totalitarian communism and democratic capitalism works in an astonishingly similar way:

> The citizens of totalitarian countries know full well that most of what they are told is double-talk, devoid of real meaning. They become adept at reading between the lines; that is, at guessing at the reality the language conceals rather than reveals. In the West [ern capitalism, *my addition*], euphemisms and circumlocutions fill the press or resound from pulpits. And advertising, by its constant use of superlatives, has succeeded in devaluing language to a point where it is a generally accepted axiom that most of the words one sees displayed on billboards or in the coloured pages of magazine advertising are as meaningless as the jingles of

> television commercials. A yawning gulf has opened between language and reality. (409)

Indeed Eastern Europeans, due to their experience of living under communism, detected a similarity between the two politico-economic systems early on. The popularity of the old comedies as well as the continuation of this tradition signaled an awareness that capitalism also existed in a void between language and reality and that language played a primary role in concealing the often-depressing new Eastern European realities. The fast spreading gospel of market economy turned into an exclusive and compulsory discourse in all Eastern European countries. All political and economic decisions were driven by a neo-liberal ideological approach that believed in the self-regulatory nature of the market. Such "neophyte bigotry" (Berend 1996: 356) was another attempt to force reality into preset and ideologically bound politico-economic structures that promised a utopian future "that will emerge at the other end [...] of the valley of tears, into the sunlight of Western freedom and prosperity" (Islam 11, 15). The birth of the new economic and social order thus resembled the communist ordering of reality in an essential way: it was yet another experiment that implied aggressive imposition of ideology over reality, the attempt to conform the latter to the former, and an effort ultimately ending in failure since the gap between the two could not successfully be veiled by ideological mystification.

The road to capitalist democracy proved to be steep and bumpy. The vacuum created in the political arena after the fall of the single-party state was filled with an amalgam of innumerous, small, "personal" parties. As the popular joke went, everyone seemed to have a party on their own in the early 1990s in Eastern Europe. The well-known, impressive resurrection of communist successor parties in the region also proved

that there were many, none-too-subtle continuities between the pre- and post-1989 politico-economic systems.[41] After 1989 material deprivation was replaced by the overabundance of new commodities paired with unemployment, soaring inflation, increasing prices, and a lack of cash that failed to meet the demands of the capitalist consumer society. At the same time, most of the old communist bureaucratic nomenklatura managed to benefit from this chaos by obtaining powerful positions in the new parliamentary politics and by jumping on the fresh opportunities offered by the free market economy. The old communist elite successfully turned itself into the privileged class of nouveau rich and into the political/governmental executives of the present.

The gap between capitalist utopian promises and grim reality resembled the tangible breach between official ideology and reality characteristic during communism. During the last fifty years the awareness of this gap engraved itself in the brains of Eastern Europeans in a way that made them suspicious towards all "emperors and their new clothes," towards political mystification and towards deception. This realization explains the popularity of the communist comedies as well as the new films' thematic and aesthetic turn towards the absurd as they attempt to demystify capitalist hegemony. Films such as *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu (Moartea domnului Lăzărescu,* Cristi Puiu, 2005), *No Man's Land* (*Nicija zemlja*, Danis Tanovic, 2001), *Underground* (Emir Kusturica, 1995), *Double or Nothing* (*Csapd le csacsi!* Péter Tímár, 1992), *I Served the King of England* (*Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále*, Jiří Menzel, 2006), *Junk Movie* (*Roncsfilm,* György Szomjas, 1992), *Philanthropy* (*Filantropica*, Nae Caranfil, 2002), and Miklós Jancsó's trilogy: *Lord's Lantern in Budapest* (*Nekem lámpást adott a kezembe az Úr*

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[41]For a comprehensive discussion on the topic see András Bozóki and John T. Ishiyama, *The Communist Successor Parties of Central and Eastern Europe*.

Pesten, 1999), *Those Bloody Mosquitoes* (*Anyád, a szúnyogok*! 2000), and *Wake Up, Mate Don't You Sleep!* (*Kelj fel komám, ne aludjál*! 2002) reveal the existing "reform fatigue" (Martina Klicperová-Baker 65) and epistemological disorientation in the new capitalist world. They examine the absurdities of Postcommunist existence showing it to be chaotic, irrational, and often violent.

When the radical changes in the cultural, economic, social and political structures of the Postcommunist transition damaged many Eastern Europeans' cognitive mapping, revisiting the communist past once again through cinema restored the lost sense of historical orientation. The new, capitalist political and economic structures make it harder and harder to generate memories of resistance (Boym 61), and so the grotesque in cinema continues to be important in reflecting on the past as well as the present in ways other than what is put forth by the hegemonic ideology.

The comedies in the Postcommunist era resist capitalism's fundamentally anti-historical nature and insist on a conscious and critical reconsideration of the painful past. These subjective forms of historical recollection are never simply about the past. They turn to the past with the present in mind and the future in sight. For Postcommunist audiences, the old and new films both offer the same things: a possibility to reassess the communist era as having some value and to express a fundamental dissatisfaction with Eastern Europe's contemporary, capitalist reality. Most importantly, the subjective rememory of communism ultimately produces a new form of collective resistance as the films reject the all to common narrative of a "natural" return to history through the transition to capitalist social and economic structures.

In the comedies, we find sources of agency, identity and a sense of community that is missing from the alienating and all-consuming capitalist Eastern European reality today. Walter Benjamin's words about the angel of history in Paul Klee's painting make a fitting description of the films' position vis-à-vis the past and the future.

> This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole of what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (257)

Like the angel of history in Klee's painting, the films stand in the present, but look towards the wreckage of the communist past and try to find something in it, a piece of memory that is precious and meaningful. Today, these films are part of an obviously shrinking counter-memory that tries to recollect history from its debris and to recognize the value of and the imperative to remember while the "storm of progress" unstoppably drives us towards the unforeseeable future.

Some films, such as *Dollybirds (Csinibaba*, Péter Timár, 1997), *The Marshall* (*Marsal*, Vinko Bresan, 1999), *Tito and I*, (*Tito i ja*, Goran Markovic, 1992), *Memories of a Golden Age* (*Amintiri din epoca de aur*, Hanno Höffer, Ioana Uricariu, Constantin Popescu, Răzvan Mărculescu, 2009), *Good Bye, Lenin* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003), and *I Served the King of England* retell the communist past in nostalgic ways. Others, for example, *Underground* and *12:08 East of Bucharest* (*A fost sau nu a fost?* Corneliu Porumboiu, 2006) examine collective memory of the recent past against official contemporary interpretations of the communist era. They resist the categorization of

communism as an anomaly or a time "outside history." Both the old and the new films allow audiences to look back at communism not as a total "waste" and a temporary "derailment" in Eastern European history to be erased, but as a historical reality that carries some meaningful message. They also enable a critical process of separation from the communist past through collective mourning.

Fifty years of communism made Eastern Europeans pragmatic in their judgments and more susceptible to the discrepancies between what they were told and what they recognized as real. It is not coincidental that Švejkian practicality resonated with viewers in the chaos of the Postcommunist era. Witnessing the uncanny reincarnation of the old-new power structures and being well aware of the ongoing corruption in the legislative branches and bureaucracies, the population readopted the grotesque hero's skeptical and critical attitude towards the disheartening political, economic, and everyday realities. Fulfilling basic everyday needs, providing sufficient food, and paying the bills on time remained people's primary focus. Consequently, the Švejkian hero who successfully maintains a basic existential stability, who uses language to his advantage, and who disregards moral obligations continues to be a popular cultural image. Films such as *The Witness 2* (*Megint tanú*, Péter Bacsó, 1995), *The Day of The Wacko* (*Dzień świra*, Marek Koterski, 2002), *Zimmer Feri* (*Fred Zimmer*, Péter Tímár, 1998), *I Served the King of England*, *Stuff and Dough* (*Marfa și banii*, Christian Puiu, 2002), *Underground*, *Controlled Conversations/Calls Controlled* (*Rozmowy kontrolwane*, Sylwester Chęciński, 1992) emphasize Švejkian practicality and argue that it is a truly heroic way to cope with Eastern Europe's transition to capitalist democracy.

Capitalist hegemony is also essentially similar to communism in attempting to direct and capitalize on desire. Controlling the body is still crucial to the production, reproduction, and legitimization of the dominant class' ideology. Consequently, representations of the female body continue to be key in the new hegemonic struggle. Perhaps woman remains a weapon for the masculine subject to disclose the grotesque and often cruel mechanisms of capitalist interpellation. Simultaneously, the phallocentric gaze soothes the fresh wounds created by the Postcommunist political and economic realities that often emasculate the male subject. Many comedies, for example *Dollybirds*, *Underground*, *Pretty Village Pretty Flame (Lepa sera, lepo gore*, Srđan Dragojević, 1996), *The Kidnapping of Agata* (*Uprowadzenie Agaty*, Marek Piwowski, 1993), *Cabaret Balkan* (*Bure baruta*, Goran Paskaljević, 1998), and most recently *I Served the King of England* all stage sexualized female bodies to draw out the grotesque in the post-revolutionary chaos of Eastern Europe, or else they create her idealized image to underpin the nostalgic revisiting of the communist past. The image of the readily available, overly sexual and vulnerable female empowers the male subject, and it also critiques capitalist exploitation and social violence. But it does so at the cost of her objectification and victimization.

Karel Kosík was amongst the few who early on recognized the vital role of laughter in Eastern Europe in order to keep people grounded against ideological interpellation. In his collection of essays from the 1960s he said,

> The absence of humor is alarming. What is being declared where there is no humor, or not enough of it? The absence of humor proclaims the loss of something essential: a person without humor lacks something vital and suffers from this loss. He is not cheated out of something insignificant or incidental, but is actually missing something quite important. […] Where there is no humor it is not a question of a mere lapse, mistake, or oversight,

> but rather open untruth. […] The absence of humor means that the internal order—that tuning which attunes man to harmony with that which exists—has been replaced by an external order. (190)

Luckily, Eastern Europeans continue to keep their (often grotesque) sense of humor close at hand when they relate their encounters with the tanks of history as they come crashing through their walls. The elevation of many comedies to cult status together with the new wave of grotesque comedies after 1989 shows that this particular representational mode has gone uninterrupted and remains a powerful cultural reaction as we now face the capitalist political and economic realities. Eastern Europeans rely on the cinematic image and its potential to provoke laughter when they intend to debunk the Grand Narratives and to draw attention to the fact that "The Emperor is *still* naked!"

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