

THE SCREEN OF LAUGHTER AND REMEMBERING

Collective Memory and Representations of State Socialism in Czech

Cinematography

This dissertation has very little to say about state socialism. Rather, it is a work about the memory of state socialism in the post-socialist Czech Republic, about the ways in which state socialism can be remembered in the present. From the perspective of collective memory, “it is not only the ancien regime that produced revolution, but in some respect the revolution produced the ancient regime, giving it a shape, a sense of closure” (Boym 2001, xvi). And there are indeed many, often conflicted modes of remembering this particular past. Françoise Mayer, for example, has identified several distinct types of remembering the “communism” in Czech society (Mayer, 2009). And her list is by no means exhaustive.

At the centre of this treatise is the Czech post-socialist cinema. My dissertation thesis was prompted by the question of how cinematic representations bear on the collective memory of state socialism in the Czech Republic. . In the first chapter, I explore how cinema represents the past in comparison to historiography. In my work, it is evident that Czech cinema does not follow the epistemological criterion of referentiality that binds historians. A more important observation – and one that does not automatically follow from the former – about the relationship between historical and cinematic representations of the state socialist past shows that the two do not even converge in terms of dominant genres. This is in part due to the different status of the past as an object of knowledge in historiography and cinematography. I begin my inquiry by a theoretical assessment of how historiography and cinematography differ in how they produce knowledge and representations of the past. The difference in the medium of representation – writing in print versus writing in moving images – is not fundamental. In this respect, I agree with some of the propositions of the growing

number of scholars who study historical films as works of history. Yet my own research does not align fully with this approach which, in my view, underestimates the socially and textually specific ways in which the two fields produce knowledge. Therefore, I argue for a limited notion of “historiophoty” and suggest that in most cases, the past will be subjected to distinct registers of knowledge in historiography and cinematography respectively: it figures as an object of history for one and as an object of memory for the other.

Cinematography is introduced here as a distinct mode of representing the past. While historiography remains the most *authoritative* discourse on the past, the genre of “history films” now stands as the most *popular* discourse on the past. I propose to turn to the conceptual apparatus of what may be designated as memory studies for the purpose of keeping the mainstream historical drama as an object of critical analysis. I wish advocate a larger interdisciplinary project that would include sociological and anthropological concepts besides those of historiography and film studies and that would treat a significant portion of the cinematographic representation of the past as an integral part of collective and cultural memory. The chapter thus offers a possible resolution to the issues that have troubled the scholarship on filmic representation of the past and the next parts of the dissertation build on this theoretical discussion.

The first part of the second chapter attempts to work with an approach to the sociology of culture inspired by Pierre Bourdieu and his concept of the field of cultural production which has the advantage of holding together the creative and artistic substance of cultural artifacts without loosing the sight of the wider social and economic context that makes cultural production possible. The impossibility of speaking of a particular content of collective memory without taking into account the social characteristics of the group that creates, preserves, and disseminates it, requires me to consider at least some basic attributes of Czech filmmakers as a group. Bourdieu’s theory of social fields and of the field of cultural

production proves to be outstandingly useful for my task in that it allows me to think of essentially aesthetic and economic factors in sociological terms. Thanks to this perspective, I could trace not only the defining tension of cinematography – the art vs. industry conflict – of which the filmmakers are well aware, but also how it affects the multiple positions in cinematic field and leads the cultural producers to adopt different strategies for takings of those positions as well as to legitimize themselves through various claims to either aesthetic authenticity or popularity. The forces active in the field of cinematic production, however, cannot be fully understood without a recourse of the analysis to the developments of Czech cinematography over the course of its own state socialist past. Especially the strong sense of cinema as an integral part of national culture cannot be explicated without the experience of the nationalized industry, which imposed political significance filmmaking. Cinematic producers thus could not but assume a role of intellectuals that has in some ways carried over to post-socialist cinema as well. In terms of public memory, its main carriers are considered to be intellectuals (Eyerman, 2001). This claim should hold particularly for Central Europe, where intellectuals have often been at odds with the ruling regimes. Intellectuals were the guardians of counter-memory (Eyal 2004; Esbenshade 1995). In terms of public memory, its main carriers are considered to be intellectuals (Eyerman, 2001). This claim should hold particularly for Central Europe, where intellectuals have often been at odds with the ruling regimes. Intellectuals were the guardians of counter-memory (Eyal 2004; Esbenshade 1995).

In the next chapter, I deal with conscious attempts of filmmakers to represent the state socialist past. This step should provide an insight into the place of remembrance in Czech post-socialist cinematography. For the assessment of how Czech filmmakers express the remembering of state socialism (and commemorate it for their audiences), I initially chose the thematic approach and identified the historical feature films made after 1989 whose entire or substantial part of the plot takes place between the years 1948–1989. On the basis of available

data, I demonstrate that the importance of the corpus is based on legitimacy both internal and external to the field of cinematic production. The corpus of films was compiled on the basis of study of the survey materials of film production in the Czech Republic (respectively, Czechoslovakia up to 1993). Since I needed to select films along a thematic line, I used primarily the synopses provided in *Filmový přehled [Film Overview]*, a monthly periodical published by National Film Archive for cinema distributors and interested public. Eventually, I arrived at a corpus of 39 films that were, at least in substantial part, thematically relevant as full-length cinematic representations of the state socialist past. The films commemorative of state socialism make up 10,5% of feature production in the examined period 1991-2010. In order to evaluate the strength of their position in Czech cinematography, they must, however, be considered from the perspective of criteria other than mere production numbers. Thus, for an index of critical reception, we may observe that Czech Lion awards disproportionately favor state socialist themes. Of the 220 prizes (discounting those for foreign films with Czech co-production) awarded since 1993, the films included in the corpus have received 51 Czech Lions, i.e. recognizably more than is their share in the overall production output. Yet the criterion of popularity operationalized through admission numbers shows their cultural dominance even more pointedly. Admission statistics for the most successful films of the 1992–2007 period, with the result of 6 905 779 admissions out of the 17 594 908 total acquired by films about state socialism, i.e. those included in the corpus. Although the numbers are not adjusted for the exact same time period, their significance in terms of percentages should be evident enough: 10,5% of produced films – those about the state socialist past – win 23,2% of (Czech Lion) awards and attract 39,2% of spectators (of newly released Czech movies). A movie with such theme is thus roughly two times more likely to win a prize and to have four times more viewers than a differently themed film. The exponential trend of the data also demonstrates that as a position-taking strategy, making

these films works two times more efficiently for accumulating economic (popularity) rather than cultural (critical appreciation) capital, while maintaining a comparative advantage against other films in both respects. The importance of the corpus is therefore based on legitimacy both internal and external to the field of cinematic production.

I trace then trace how the cinematic representations of state socialism have evolved over the two decades following 1989. In the description of individual films, I pay attention to their commemorative aspect and to how some film critics comment on the films' capacity to represent the state socialist past. There appears to be a tendency of filmmakers to create films in clusters pertinent to different post-socialist periods. The closer description of the corpus and its changing composition over the past two decades, however, showed that the collective post-socialist memory of filmmakers has developed relatively autonomously from the political field. The heightened symbolic and cultural capital that the filmic remembrance seems to be yielding stems from within the field itself. Again, this may be attributable to the status of public intellectuals which, for better or worse, Czech filmmakers attained under the previous regime. The thesis that the cinematic memory of state socialism depends on socio-historical characteristics of filmmakers in their capacity of social group thus appears to be valid, although the latest films hint at new trends that could resemble the official memory in their unequivocal condemnation of the past. Indeed, it is as if the filmmakers would attempt to cut off all the continuities that link their field to the state socialist past only toward the end of the second post-socialist decade. However, the permanence of this new trend can only be ascertained in the future developments of cinematic memory.

The new trend of emphasis on drama, tragedy, and even thriller as genres of remembrance replaces the previous unchallenged dominance of comedy as the main genre in which the narratives of the past used to be told. Since the category of the genre seems to be a crucial one for the corpus, I focus on it in a separate chapter. For sociologists, literary

categories were something that the discipline needs to avoid if it should count as a social science (Lepenies 1988). Here, I wish to show that one such category – the genre – is actually very conducive to sociological inquiry into culture. Genre as a category of analysis, I argued, is particularly suited to the needs of a sociologist for research of how people make sense of the social world and of the past. Once genre is apprehended not as a static literary category, but as a historically changing set of rules that serve to control the production and consumption of cultural texts, then it can be examined a symptom of wider social forces. The relevance of genres for sociology has a parsimonious justification: “Genres only exist in so far as a social group declares them and enforces the rules that constitute them” (Hodge and Kress 1998). Some sociologists work routinely with the concept of genre and use it to study cultural hierarchies (DiMaggio 1987; Peterson and Kern 1996; Bryson 1996). However, such usage treats genres as stable categories, which is a notion that the humanities have long abandoned (Fowler 1982; Frow 2006) I therefore briefly describe a dynamic and social conception of genre that allows for a study of the social meaning of genres. It enables the analyst to make basic assumptions about the meanings of cultural objects, without requiring an in-depth interpretation which is the domain of the humanities. Then I proceed to the analysis of comedy and treat it as the major “memory genre” (Olick 1999) of Czech post-socialist cinematography.

The analysis of comedy genre and of its specific position in the cinematic collective memory of state socialism reveals in the context of Czech nationalism, that the genre has achieved symbolic and political relevance. The contemporary status of the comedy genre in Czech cultural memory not only has roots in the country’s pseudo-colonial history, but it is also a rather direct continuation of the field of state socialist cultural forms. What I call the generic enigma of the post-socialist cinema – the dominance of the comedy genre in the representation of a potentially traumatic, state socialist past – turns out to be more of an irony,

in which the past is renounced by the very forms that it has nurtured. Moreover, the irony is a double one, because the continuity of forms betrays the present as a failed renunciation of the past. A useful way to think of the role of comedy as a political commentary can be extrapolated from James Scott's influential theory of "hidden transcripts", which he developed in order to better account for grievances of dominated peoples. The genre of comedy, with its lower rank in established artistic hierarchies, was a discursive vehicle perfectly suited for this strategy. Due to this socio-political framing of comedy, I argue that the genre in its nationally specific forms is a manifestation of what can be called "semi-public transcript". Unlike hidden transcript, it takes place not off- but onstage; it is not shielded from the view of power, yet the genre blurs the contours of the discourse. The usage of comedy as a semi-public transcript in Czech history is what I consider to be the source of supplementary cultural and symbolic capital. Although disapproved by filmmakers and critics who support further autonomy of the field, the genre can rely on positive evaluation from other cultural producers as well as consumers.

The lower status comedy in genre hierarchies enforced by highbrow critics, producers, and consumers shields the genre from severe oversight, and yet it still allows a communication of messages critical of the powers that be across large audiences. By ostensibly aligning themselves with this tradition – indeed a collective memory of its own – the filmmakers (many of whom were debutans or members of the up-and-coming generation) were insisting on a sense of continuity with the state socialist past. We must underscore the paradox that representations of the past in Czech cinema take on forms – i.e. genres – that flourished under the state socialist regime. The cinematic remembrance does indeed appear to be self-referential in many aspects and relatively autonomous – just as the field itself – from other forms of collective memory. It cannot be equated with national memory, but it should be

considered as a serious contender, due to the popularity of its most successful narratives as well as due to the symbolic capital of cinematic producers.

The last chapter shows representations of the past that may be considered as the most powerful counterparts of the collective memory of filmmakers and cultural producers. The chapter addresses strategies of history writing and legislative orders for remembering and forgetting what may be considered as pivotal authorities on the past in the public sphere devoted to commemoration. In the Czech Republic, restoration of the authority of everyday legality thus achieved primacy in its post-socialist organization. In this manner, the state repudiates personal testimony as a necessary precondition in the pursuit of “truth” about the past. The state apparatus gets fully credited with the capability of unveiling the said “truth”. Historians make up a social group themselves and the persistence of state socialist trajectories affects them no less than it impinges on lawmakers or filmmakers. Contemporary historiography is itself a product of the past which it sets forth to study. The real problem of Czech historiography from epistemological perspective centers on a peculiar erosion of borders between the state’s memorial politics, historical science, and standard criminal and judicial apparatus. The fact that some historians would see it as their task to critique what they perceive as a dominant approach in their discipline, shows that the dominance is not – and cannot be – complete. Likewise, the victorious state’s policies conceal the plurality of views that had been legislated away. Yet the emphasis that I have placed on the dominance and contrasts should, or such was the intention, draw attention to the main principles that shape knowledge of the past in the post-socialist Czech state and historiography. These two fields can be considered as a background against which filmmakers put forward their own representations of the past. All these collective actors share to some extent dependence on the trajectories constituted in their fields during the state socialist era – and their past alliances and divergences ensure that today their respective representations of state socialism will also

differ. While history and official memory seem to be very close to each other, they are distinct from cinematic memory. Nonetheless, the latest trends in cinematography suggest a possible rapprochement.

The interdisciplinary scope of my work implies the use of a diverse set of methods. The first chapter, theoretical in nature, relies on an extensive literature review and argumentation. The second chapter uses deduction to heuristically re-organize primary and secondary sources on Czech cinematography. The theoretical premises are based on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social fields. In the following chapter, I analyze several different types of quantitative data for descriptive purposes. I also employ rudimentary textual analysis in order to build-up and then describe a corpus of cinematic works. The last chapter is partly methodological, as it strives to establish the relevance of genre analysis for the sociology of culture. In the remainder of the work I use the genre analysis to reveal historical trajectory of the genre of comedy and highlight the historically specific way in which it connects cultural producers and consumers through symbolic objects – representations.