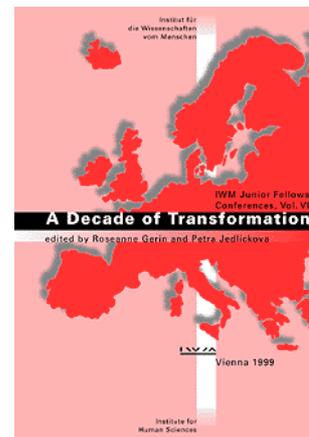


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Envisioning a "Socialist Way of Life:" Ideology and Contradiction in Czechoslovakia, 1969-1989

Paulina Bren

The history of communism in Czechoslovakia, and particularly the story of the 1970s and 1980s, has often been narrated as a succession of oppositions, dichotomies or - to borrow from the discourse of the period - of dialectics. At the root of this history is the long-held conviction that the postwar communist world of Eastern Europe was made up of two polar opposites: the official and the unofficial. Scholarly studies have frequently focused on "official" culture *versus* "unofficial" culture, on the "first" (state-planned) economy *versus* the "second" (black-market) economy, on the Party elite *versus* the dissident elite. The impression is that there were two neatly dug trenches on either side of a fence; in one trench persons belonging to the state (i.e., Czechoslovak's General Party Secretary Gustav Husak with lesser Party members in tow) while in the other, perhaps in a less regimented recline, were those who had declared themselves in open opposition and thus lived outside of the state and Party structure (i.e., dissidents, with the philosopher-playwright Vaclav Havel coming first to mind). The no-man's land between the two trenches has been addressed as the playground of the so-called and not entirely

clearly defined "gray zone,"¹ those persons who did not want to be sitting in either of the trenches but who were willing to benefit from both.

What does this mean for our understanding of the last twenty years of Czechoslovak communism? The 1970s and 1980s were officially referred to by the Czechoslovak communist government as *normalization*; the term was, without the least bit of irony, intended to point to a return of "normalcy" dragged in on the heels of the Soviet-led invasion, a soothing antidote to the "abnormalcy" of Prague Spring's project for a new, reformed communism. Sometimes, although not always, dissident Vaclav Havel defined the period as "post-totalitarian." For many other observers as well as participants and bystanders, the twenty years between the demise of Prague Spring and the reemergence of hope in the so-called "velvet revolution" of late 1989 could be described as a strangely wishy-washy period of communism. Gone were the propagandistic crudeness and the revolutionary fervor of communist rule of the 1950s which we more readily associate with images of the "Soviet," of combine harvesters and women with red kerchiefs tied around their necks ploughing the fields. Gone too were the 1950s' political excesses such as the Jachymov uranium mines labor camp for the politically unacceptable and the Slansky show trials which eliminated Jewish members from the first communist government's ranks. The 1970s and 1980s were more akin to a "banality of evil," to the continuation of the Party's power hegemony which was now masked in the ordinary, the everyday. That is why the image of the two trenches (of "them" versus "them") begins to lose its validity as an ordering metaphor come the 1970s.

This image of two trenches is further imbued with two assumptions. The first assumption is that the second of the trenches - the one which was the property of dissidents, of unofficial culture, of the second economy - tells us more about these twenty years than does the trench belonging to the official realm. The second assumption is that while a no man's land did exist, those persons comfortably and firmly seated in either of the two trenches did not venture into the no man's land, let alone into the opposing trench. But as we well know - and only now with communist archives opening, albeit creakily, can we pursue this commonplace knowledge - where one looks determines the conclusions one makes.² A recent anthropo-

¹ Siklova, Jirina. "The 'gray zone' and the future of dissent in Czechoslovakia. Social research, vol. 57, no. 2 (summer 1990).

² Archival laws in the Czech Republic are at present rather arbitrary, allowing for an archive director to frequently allow access to an individual researcher despite more centralized rules barring general access to documents from the last thirty years. Materials specifically on persons still living are for the most part off limits.

logical study of the art world during *normalization*, for example, shows how the boundaries there were less fixed and regulated than we might think, with artists and art students frequently partaking of both official and unofficial exhibitions and wage-earning schemes.³ Moreover, it is tempting to favor a reading of dissident writings over Party materials because the former is dynamic, intellectually satisfying and accessible while the latter is not. I am arguing, however, that a better approach is to read both official and unofficial materials, side-by-side when possible, disregarding rather than embracing the easy-speak of communist dialectics and of cold-war opposites. To embrace the paradigm of official and unofficial (and all that we readily associate with these terms) is not necessarily the most appropriate means to try to understand *how* the last gasps of communism in Eastern Europe differed from the more ideologically straightforward period of Stalinism.

The "truth" as presented by the Party was a vision of how its leadership desired, expected, even demanded that the social, the political, the ethical and the economic be, or at least appear. The "truth" presented by the majority of dissidents was a derivative truth, based on an ongoing critique of the communist status quo.⁴ Moreover, with some more influential dissidents former communists themselves, it was not unusual for dissident critique to be formulated along Marxist lines of argument or thinking, intentionally or not. Vaclav Havel, who did not belong to this Marxist tradition, however also insisted on absolutes. For him, there were two paths to choose from: "living within the lie" (that is, partaking of Party structures directly or even indirectly) and "living within the truth" (not partaking of them).

But lying somewhere between these two life narratives was also something one might call a "lived reality;" we can think of it as a liminal zone of in-between-ness, a juncture between "living within the lie" and "living within the truth." It is what the majority of people in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic did after 1969. "Lived reality" was really a constant evaluation and re-evaluation of one's ethical bounda-

³ Svasek, Maruska. *Styles, struggles, and careers: an ethnography of the Czech art world, 1948-1992*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam (Academish Proefschrift), 1996.

⁴ Again, it was Vaclav Havel who was more the exception and seemed to understand the limits to such a derivative truth. In his essay "Power of the Powerless," he tried to argue that the concept of authentic living was not only appropriate for finding a way out of the quagmire of "post-totalitarian" (that is, "normalized") Czechoslovakia, but also applicable to the needs of Western parliamentary democracies. Havel, Vaclav. *The power of the powerless*. In Keane, John (ed.). *The Power of the powerless: citizens against the state in Central-Eastern Europe*. London: 1985; New York: 1990.

ries in relation to new challenges frequently arising in everyday life:⁵ Do I join the Party and get the promotion I want?; Do I bribe the nursery-school director to accept my child and so partake in the corruption I deplore?⁶

One of the many reasons that the metaphor of official versus unofficial has been so popular in understanding the history of late communism in East Central Europe is that it is comprehensible intellectually, and for some also ideologically. Perhaps more importantly still, the metaphor of opposites is accessible methodologically. A "lived reality" is of course more difficult to reconstruct than is the Party's official discourse or the dissidents' unofficial discourse - the latter two both exist as a written text and are relatively accessible to anyone with the necessary language proficiency. But while a "lived reality" cannot be reconstructed with the same ease, it certainly can be explored. My intention in the following pages is to do just that by evoking the *contradictions* of the official and the unofficial discourse, particularly as they pertained to the production of ideology through television. The disorderly image behind the constructed ideological façade is that which brings into question the either-or/them-versus-them metaphor frequently employed to understand this period of contemporary history.

Not only should we give more berth to how and what we define as "official" and "unofficial," but similarly it is helpful to collapse strict notions of high and low culture. Some of the most ubiquitous façades that made up the imagery and the backdrop for *normalization's* style of communism were state-authorized popular cultures. These can be divided into two kinds: the kind in which Czechs⁷ partici-

⁵ Czech sociologist Ivo Mozny, borrowing from Bourdieu, argues in a book written shortly after the 1989 changes that, in fact, during communism people banded together in informal "family" groupings as a way to deal more efficiently with these everyday challenges they faced. One of the reasons why Charter 77 was unsuccessful in drumming up large and active support was based on the public's general perception that these same dissidents belonged to the "power strata" because as a "family" they possessed access and privilege well above the norm. Mozny, Ivo. *Proc tak snadno... Nektere rodinne duvody sametove revoluce*. Praha: Sociologicke Nakladatelstvi, 1991.

⁶ Gender studies scholar Hana Havelkova has pointed to the practice of women "conveniently" getting pregnant and taking maternity leave during communism when, for example, at their place of work they were broached with an invitation to enter the Party. Havelkova, Hana. Women in and after a "classless" society. [manuscript, 1999: written as a chapter for the forthcoming collection *Women and social class: international feminist perspectives*] (quoted with the permission of the author).

⁷ My focus is on the Czech past of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic during *normalization*. The Slovak Socialist Republic's experience of *normalization* differed somewhat for a number

pated out of obligation such as May Day parades, and the kind in which they voluntarily took part such as the Spartakiada gymnastic galas, stadium-size exhibitions of physical health and mass coordination. Voluntary state cultural participation also included the attendance at theaters, cinemas, and the reading of official magazines and novels, for example. It is interesting to note how "communist" television, film, official novels and special interest magazines, which occupied both the time and the minds of many citizens of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (CSSR), have been overlooked.⁸ This is so even though scholars have long agreed on the advantages that fledgling communist parties reaped across postwar East Central Europe by quickly recognizing the importance of mass culture.⁹ The Party, in fact, never ceased to appreciate the media's direct relevance to its power-hold. The evidence for this, at least in the case of Czechoslovakia, can be found in the example of television's role as liaison between the government and the people during *normalization's* two decades.

How do we begin to understand the construction of ideology¹⁰ behind the myriad of state-authorized cultural practices and, specifically here, within the medium of television in communist Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 1980s? Scholarly analyses of communist culture have most often focused on Soviet artwork and film and the message behind the image. But these studies of Soviet imagery usually stop short at Stalin's death, while analyses of East European communist imagery are for the most part absent, and altogether so after the 1960s.¹¹ Again, the explanation

of reasons, including a different set of priorities (national over political) and a greater degree of outspokenness present in the Slovak media. The problem, however, is how to articulate this focus linguistically. Although during *normalization* the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic for the first time became a federated state with two separate republics, it remained highly Prago-centric.

- ⁸ Actually, unlike Western social scientists, the dissidents frequently wrote about the official popular culture that they watched the public consume with such gusto.
- ⁹ For example, one of the famous "salami tactics" (the term used to suggest a gradual slicing away of democratic practices and, therefore, the strangulation of other parties' influence) in the communist takeovers in Eastern Europe after WWII was to take control of the limited paper supplies, and thus be in a position to determine which newspapers, journals and books could be published.
- ¹⁰ When I use the term "ideology" I define it in the strictest sense of the term - as the concepts and theories behind a given political/social program. Ideology is too often confused with the term "propaganda."
- ¹¹ For an entertaining look at how the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe tried to sing loud their political message through film musicals, see the German documentary *East Side Story*. Dana Ranga, director; ANDA Film Production: 1997. Like its more scholarly counterparts, the

that comes to mind is that the images and narratives of communist ideology prior to the 1970s are more *readable* in that they offer a picture or a text which works with the staple myths of Marxist ideology (i.e., capitalist versus worker, past drudgery versus future utopia, individual self-interest versus community). By the 1970s, certainly in Czechoslovakia, these ideological messages dependent on stark contrasts became diluted and no longer acceptable or accepted *despite* the reassertion of a conservative and repressive communist government - a government which, in comparison to the communist parties in power at the same time in Hungary and Poland, seemed like a throwback to the 1950s.

So how do we read the construction of ideology during this later period of communism when it no longer corresponds as readily to the mythological framework of earlier communism? Most current theoretical frameworks about the process of ideological production are intended as Marxist readings of the capitalist production of popular culture. Yet, somewhat ironically, these Marxist-based frameworks with which to critique capitalism are actually surprisingly appropriate for conceptualizing what went on in the 1970s and 1980s in Eastern Europe. One scholar, writing about the relationship between ideology and image under capitalism, defines the process of ideology construction in the following way:

Ideology operates like [Claude] Levi-Strauss's bricoleur: it makes do with what's on hand - with the systems of signs produced and circulating at any given historical moment - in order to mask those contradictions that emerge in the production of these very signs.

A society shall be known by its works. Its works provide the representations by which a society gives witness to its own existence.

*Representations provide the material with which ideology proposes an imaginary relationship to the real conditions of existence. But these representations are a product of the real conditions of existence.*¹²

There are, I think, at least three ideas here which can all be applied to *normalization*. First, ideology uses the signs most readily available within society at the time (rather than the exclusive use of a timeless communist canon of bad versus good,

story of ideology and images in *East Side Story* also ends in the mid-1960s. In other words, analyses tend to end at the point at which the cultural images and narratives become less bipolar and excitingly cold war-ish.

¹² The author made this statement as one continuous paragraph. I have separated it out into three statements for clarity. Nichols, Bill. *Ideology and the image*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981, p. 290.

past versus future). The purpose is to assemble these readily recognizable signs in such a way as to mask the contradictions that these signs can also convey, particularly in their production. Second, a society's cultural works are intended to reflect the predominant way of life, and so further reinforce it. For example, we recognize what we understand to be ourselves on the television screen and, thus, we are what we see on the screen. Third, the process of producing these representations of ourselves is more true than the representations themselves.

Assembling the Signs

The August 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia was intended to put a stop to Prague Spring initiatives which to Moscow's eyes had spun out of control. The invasion was soon followed by the dismissal of reform communist Party Secretary Alexander Dubcek and the ascension of conservative communist Gustav Husak.¹³ The start of Husak's reign as Party Secretary, which lasted until 1987 when he went into semi-retirement retaining the role of President, was accompanied by a major purge of the Communist Party. Unsurprisingly, Czechoslovak television did not fare well. The previous director of television, Jiri Pelikan, was now replaced by Jan Zelenka who, like most of the *normalization* elite, had come of age during the crucial 1945 to 1948 period. And, also like the majority of the *normalization* leadership, Zelenka would have longevity, remaining at his post as director of Czechoslovak Television for the entire period of *normalization* until 1989. Yet even though the television purge was thorough enough to please even the hard-liners,¹⁴ in the following years Zelenka found himself having to respond to the Party's ongoing suspicions surrounding television. These suspicions were generated by the Party's mixed feelings toward the powerful medium of television. To the Party, television implied potential political volatility at the same time that it promised

¹³ When writing about Eastern Europe, political labels always pose a problem. During the period of *normalization*, General Secretary Husak proved himself to be a conservative communist leader on par with the unimaginative and orthodox General Secretary Novotny from the 1950s. Yet in earlier times Husak had been cast in an oppositionary role: in April 1954, then General Secretary Novotny publicly stated that Husak, who had just been handed down a sentence of life imprisonment, was a dangerous Slovak "bourgeois nationalist."

¹⁴ For a full account of the purge at Czechoslovak Television, see Cysarova, Jarmilla. *Televize a Totalitni Moc 1969-1975*. Prague: USD (Materialy, studie, dokumenty. Cislo 10/1998), 1998.

political seduction. Finding a way to capitalize on the latter without evoking the former was Zelenka's task.

In late 1972, the year the nationwide purge of reform communists was officially announced to be complete, Zelenka, the new "normalizing" director of Czechoslovak Television, admitted that a "portion of viewers still remains indifferent to Television News, and are turning on their television sets to watch plays and entertainment programs at about eight o'clock." He went on to point out how serious a problem this was for the Party's goal of spreading the *normalization* message; he promised to get people to turn on their television sets before eight o'clock in time for the news.¹⁵ His promise was never fulfilled. A year later in 1973, in an interview in the Central Committee's weekly newspaper, *Tribuna*, Zelenka explained a change in his approach. He stated that the main aim for the following year would be to "intensify the ideological political content of the television programs."¹⁶ One could read the remark in the following way: having failed to bring the people to the news, he would bring the news to the people. He would take the political propaganda associated with the television news programs (which no one was willing to watch) and put it instead into the entertainment programs which more persons voluntarily tuned into.

But television programming had problems enough luring viewers without the added problem of intensifying "the ideological political content." In 1975, even the head of the Editorial Department of Propaganda and Documentation admitted that viewers' letters commenting on Czechoslovak television programming more often than not described it as "uninteresting, lacking in objectivity, and dull."¹⁷ But did the Party really care that its citizen-viewers found television insufficiently entertaining? It was not a concern which seemed relevant to the Party in the 1950s and, if one were to peruse the newspapers or listen to the radio, one could easily conclude that neither did it seem relevant to the Party in the early 1970s. In a 1976 television interview, for instance, Dr. Milena Balasova, deputy director of Czechoslovak Television, was asked to comment on letters from disgruntled viewers who had written to the Czech communist daily *Rude Pravo*. These letter-correspondent-citizens had complained that it was tiresome to watch continuous images of facto-

¹⁵ *Czechoslovak Television*; December 20, 1972: 21:15 [*Open Society Archives*: hereafter referred to as *OSA*].

¹⁶ *Tribuna*, no. 3, 17 January 1973 (as quoted in *RFE Czechoslovak Situation Report*, 21 February 1973) [*OSA*].

¹⁷ As quoted in the *Czechoslovak Situation Report*, 21 May 1975 [*OSA*].

ries fulfilling their plans and of expressions of friendship with the Soviet Union. Balasova refused to assume the role of apologist and made it clear instead that she had no time for such superficial complaints. She shot back at the dissatisfied viewers, warning rather sinisterly that they should "in these days ponder over what they are writing and whether their views are correct." According to Balasova, Czechoslovak television was not supposed to be like Western television just as socialist society was not supposed to be like capitalist society.¹⁸

Yet in the same way that the *normalization* leadership had to face the public's increased knowledge of "capitalist society" (particularly following the huge influx of Czech tourism into Western Europe during the liberal Prague Spring years of 1967 and 1968), it also had to face their increased exposure to "Western television." Jan Simek, the first Party Secretary of the Western Bohemian Region, complained in 1974 about the influence of Western television available to persons living in his part of the country. He explained that "... Western television programs were presented very cleverly. They appeared to be non-political and objective but were broadcasting slander and sly inventions to Czechoslovakia."¹⁹ His deconstruction of Western television techniques, however, sounded rather wistful, as if the only response to the popularity and lure of capitalist television was to have some of the same on communist television.

Indeed, the truth was that, despite Balasova's schoolmarm response to the television viewers' complaints, and her dismissiveness as to their importance, Czechoslovak Television (and by implication both she as its deputy director and Zelenka as its director) was obsessed with what its viewers' thought. In fact, television took on the task of investigating its viewers' opinions as intensely and rigorously as if it were a democratic polling agency readying for the next elections. The evidence for this is in the assorted weekly, monthly, yearly, national and regional breakdowns of viewers' television programming choices and of the letters they sent in - both signed and anonymous.²⁰ These carefully crafted reports, frequently illustrated with graphs,

¹⁸ *Czechoslovak Television*; January 3, 1976: 19:50 [OSA].

¹⁹ *Tvorba*, June 12, 1974 [OSA]. Satellite television was similarly seen as a looming danger which could potentially put the country's propagandists out of commission [see Horeni's statements in the minutes of the meeting of the Ideological Commission of the Central Committee on Oct. 6, 1980; *State Central Archives* [from hereon referred to as "SUA," UV KSC fond 10/10; sv. 2; aj. 10; bod 0/b: p. 26].

²⁰ All of these reports can be found in *Czech Television's Archive of Written Materials*, Prague [from hereon referred to as "CTAPF"]. The collection and collation of viewers' letters are particularly impressive. Each month a two to three page report was put together listing how

were then sent to the Central Committee and other high offices of the Party for perusal.

In short, the message put out in the press was that the Party acknowledged television's shortcomings (although during the 1970s and 1980s "constructive criticism" about superficial aspects of *normalization* was so much the rage that articles seemed to try to outdo each other in constructively pointing out solvable deficiencies). But at the same time it was implied that the viewers' discontent bothered neither the Party nor the television leadership so much as to accelerate their search for more entertaining television. Yet, looking further still - into the Communist Party central archives - one finds that the Party was very concerned, almost panic-stricken, and moreover quite confused about television's task.

The Ideological Commission was one of the Central Committee's sub-commissions which focused on a particular aspect of society. The members of the Ideological Commission consisted of top leaders in media and the arts as well as members of the Central Committee. These members (for the most part men) gathered periodically to discuss matters of ideology, serving as a sort of collective watchdog over current ideological matters. In a 1980 meeting of the Ideological Commission²¹ (which was to serve the specific purpose of discussing the recent Fifteenth Party Congress where it had been officially decided that the media had to take a top priority), one of the comrades in attendance was unusually forthright in his opinion. He remarked to the commission that while the Fifteenth Party Congress had said that it was necessary to get rid of the tone of officialdom and formality which dominated political news, "comrades, putting your hands to your hearts, you must admit that practically nothing has changed here since the 15th Congress." He went on to describe the news as a constant account of meetings, conferences, and proclamations: "In print it can be buried, but on television similar occasions beat into the eyes quantitatively and one gets the impression that our lives are made up of

many letters had been sent in during the past month, how many had been signed versus how many had been anonymous, and the themes which the letters addressed (from frequent complaints that the viewer did not want to have to listen to the Slovak language on television to complaints that it was impossible to find baby's clothes in the shops). Unfortunately, most of the letters themselves, once thus ordered and arranged, were discarded.

²¹ The Ideological Commission during *normalization* was led by the extremely conservative Vasil Bilak who was also Secretary of Ideology and of Foreign Affairs from November 1968 until 1988.

meetings."²² Although the leadership understood that Czechoslovak Television had to attract an audience,²³ had to have people tune in to its daily political messages of social and economic well-being, the attempt to use this powerful propagandistic instrument was as mired in indecision and precariousness as was the *normalization* regime in general.

At the same meeting of the Ideological Commission, television director Jan Zelenka tried to get across to the members of the commission just how delicate a task it was to project ideology successfully through the television screen. According to him, it was a world within which it was easy to lose one's footing. He explained:

Television is without a doubt a political instrument, and precisely for that reason we must look for all forms that would allow for the widest mass of viewers to be bound to television, for them to have the feeling that television is theirs ... At the same time, we must watch that entertainment does not find itself presenting some bourgeois position let alone anti-socialist ... But at the same time we have to be careful that in the area of entertainment, that all things politic - and hopefully you'll forgive me for that word - do not stick out from every program like a sore thumb ... Nevertheless on the other hand, we are aware that we cannot introduce nervousness into our viewers with our criticism. On the contrary, we must fill the viewer with the sense that the Party is controlling the situation, is managing and knows how to continue.²⁴

Here we find, hidden behind the carefully closed doors of the Ideological Commission's meeting room, an exposition of the contradictions which existed in the production of ideology. The contradictions are, in fact, neatly laid out by the director of television, the man hired to lead the way in the ideological "orientation" of the viewers.

Normalization, I would argue, was marked by a certain impotence of power among its leadership. This impotence led to what was frequently understood to be

²² Comrade Horeni in the minutes of the meeting of the Ideological Commission of the Central Committee on Oct. 6, 1980; UV KSC fond 10/10 [Fond of the Central Committee of the Czech Communist Party]; sv. 2; aj. 10; bod 0/b: p. 26 [SUA].

²³ As mentioned earlier, at this same meeting imminent satellite programming from the West and what that would mean to East European communist societies was also discussed.

²⁴ [the italics are my own] Minutes of the meeting of the Ideological Commission of the Central Committee on 6 Oct. 1980; UV KSC fond 10/10; sv. 2; aj. 10; bod 0/b: p. 6-7 [SUA].

a strangely static and altogether unresponsive form of rule. The inability of the regime to activate itself or society, and its humble goal throughout *normalization* to do little more than maintain the status quo, was buoyed by a knowledge (and, privately, an acknowledgment) of the contradictions that lay behind communist ideology.²⁵ Linked to that knowledge was a fear that the contradictions would erupt, that they would reveal themselves like the emperor without clothes, and that, most importantly, enough people might actually point out that the emperor was naked.²⁶ This hesitation to rule unquestioningly, the desire to do no more than hang onto power for as long as possible, was symptomatic of *normalization*. It is what made this period so vastly different from the 1950s and 1960s.

The ever-present, innate contradictions of late communist power were further underscored by the sense that the 1970s and 1980s were under siege by both the past and the future. The past was the first to become off-limits. Discussing the past would mean having to acknowledge Prague Spring (which was considered best forgotten, blotted out from public memory). As the economy began to slow down, at the same time that people had come to expect more from their lives, the bourgeois interwar years too ceased to be a comparison point trotted out by the Party to demonstrate its own success. Simultaneously, the future also seemed too precarious to discuss at any length or with any enthusiasm; even the Party no longer pretended that the future held the promise of a communist utopia.²⁷ So with the past and the

²⁵ It is important to remember that just as the communist regime and Party were very different in the 1950s compared to the later *normalization* period, so too the public vis-à-vis the communist regime was very different before and after Prague Spring. In the 1950s, for example, there were no organized dissident circles like those we associate with Charter 77. Long-term or initial casual support of the Party was easily elicited from young intellectuals, such as the writer Milan Kundera, or simply from people who had no points of comparison with which to assess what they saw around them. Thus, televised lectures about the state of the economy given by Otto Sik (the Prague Spring's reform economist) in June and July 1968 were eye-opening for the majority of the population. In other words, Prague Spring (despite its tragic end) permanently changed the relationship between the public and the regime; disbelief rather than belief was the order of the day from thereon.

²⁶ Supposedly, in the first few days of Charter 77's appearance on the political landscape, Vasil Bilak was convinced that the number of signatories would amount to tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands. Time would soon prove him wrong; only about 1,000 people altogether signed the Charter 77 document from its inception in 1977 until the "velvet revolution" in November 1989. PENAS, Jiri. "Drzet lyru a krok". *Respekt*, no. 7, 10-16 February 1997.

²⁷ Writing about economics and the *normalization* regime, economist Martin Myant notes that, "this was a leadership that boasted of promising no more than stability, certainty and a 5%

future off-limits, there remained the present as a point of discussion and expectation. Yet this "lived reality," this everyday life in the present, was itself a constant reminder of the contradictions between promise and deliverance, between official discourse and private experience.

The Representation and Re-enforcement of a "Socialist Way of Life"

There was one scriptwriter who was up to the task of reconciling the contradictions which lay obstinately at the gateway to television's potential as an ideological cheerleader of sorts. He was Jaroslav Dietl, whose immensely popular²⁸ multi-episode, prime-time television series about contemporary everyday life in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic later defined *normalization* as much as they were defined by *normalization*. These series were deft, televised portrayals of the "socialist way of life" - a term which littered the communist papers, but which was otherwise ill-defined. Jaroslav Dietl put a face and a form to the "socialist way of life," and then filled it with color.²⁹

In these television series which usually lasted eleven episodes, Dietl incorporated the precepts which at any given time the Party needed to get across to its audience-citizens. Crucial ideological notions, if presented via the television news programs, had limited receptivity. As television director Zelenka had admitted at the very start of the *normalization* era, no one was willing to watch the television news. But to propagate these same concepts through a Dietl television series was something else altogether. The most famous "success," in this sense of the word, was Dietl's series called *The Man at the Townhall* (*Muz na radnici*). *The Man at the Townhall* was expressly intended as a mass mental preparation for the planned erasure of historical towns and the construction of prefabricated, high-rise apartment towers. In this case, the boundary between fact and fiction became so tenuous and so boldly

annual growth rate." MYANT, Martin. *The Czechoslovak economy, 1948-1988: The battle for economic reform*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 183.

²⁸ According to the Television's reports on viewers' watching habits, a Dietl television program inevitably pulled in the highest ratings.

²⁹ In an October 4, 1980 letter from prison to his wife Olga, Vaclav Havel wrote that on television he had watched "more episodes in that Dietl serial, no longer as idiotic as the episode I mentioned last time, but still typical Dietl with all that that entails. I'd like to write an essay about the phenomenon." To my knowledge, Havel never got around to writing the essay. HAVEL, Vaclav. *Letters to Olga*, Paul Wilson, trans. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990; 1991, p. 117.

ignored that in the television series the imaginary town of Kunstat was based on and based in the real historical town of Beroun. While the television audience breathlessly followed the tale of the fictional town of Kunstat's architectural destruction and modern transformation, the same things were happening in the real town of Beroun. As the story of Kunstat's rejection of its past and its leap into the future with housing for everyone progressed, so did Beroun's. The tragic destruction of Beroun's historical center and its very real physical make-over along the lines of "real socialism's" aesthetics became the "set" for many of the series' exterior shots.³⁰

But what about Dietl, the architect of the fake town of Kunstat? Did the success of his television series *The Man at the Townhall* in some way also make him the architect of Beroun's historical and architectural ruin? By becoming an instrument of the Party, the messenger of its word, was he also its agent? One certainly could say that, like the Party for which he worked, Dietl was well aware of the potential power of television. In a roundtable discussion on the topic of what makes a good television series, held at the offices of the cultural communist weekly *Tvorba* (a discussion that was then edited and published in the weekly in 1978), Dietl pointed out that one could not assume an audience out there but had to work at keeping it. Two of the other participants in the discussion - Josef Holy, editor of the Czech communist daily *Rude Pravo*, and Milos Vojta, co-editor of *Tvorba's* cultural department - immediately objected to this assumption. Holy argued in a familiar fashion: "The point of a television series is not under any condition to grab hold of the viewer. That in itself could be quite easy. Socialist television should never be interested in trying to gain viewers in this way." Dietl, seemingly implying a political context beyond that of a television series, responded slyly: "I am surprised at comrades Vojta and Holy, that they don't consider the battle for viewers important. The best scriptwriter and the best script, if millions of viewers don't watch it, has no meaning."³¹

Ironically, Dietl's remark - using the themes of television, script, and audience - echoes Vaclav Havel's most famous precept about "living within the lie." This probably was not Dietl's intention (and certainly not recognized as such by the *Tvorba* editors who published these excerpts) when he remarked that even the best television script loses its meaning when it does not have a large number of viewers.

³⁰ *Architekt Jaroslav Dietl* [documentary]. Czech Television: 1997

³¹ "Poslani a cil televiznich serialu v boji o umelecke ztvareni socialistickeho cloveka." *Tvorba*, no. 23, 7 June 1978: 6-7.

Yet Havel's advocacy for stepping out of the ritualization, the script of everyday life - to cease "living within the lie" and begin "living within the truth" - was based on this same notion. In essence, Havel's argument was that if millions of citizens (viewers) were to cease to partake in (watch) the ritualized everyday life under communist *normalization* (the script), then that same script would eventually lose meaning, leaving the regime and the political authorities (the scriptwriters) without any real power.

Indeed, it was television's purpose as a producer of ideological images to present a visual and oral version of what some called a "socialist way of life" and others called "living within the lie." But to be rendered valid, it had to be watched. The anonymous letters frequently sent into the Prague television headquarters often addressed this very point, and attempted to strip away at the constructed "lie." The number of anonymous letters increased during the early part of 1977 in response to television's anti-Charter 77 broadcasting. One letter sent on 7 March 1977 was addressed to Dr. Balasova, the same deputy television director who had in the early 1970s dismissed viewers' complaints about the tediousness of political programming.³² Dr. Balasova sent this particular anonymous letter on to the deputy head of the Propaganda and Agitation Division of the Central Committee with a cover letter advising him to read it. It seems to have been an unusual gesture but perhaps understandable because of the substance of the letter which eloquently makes bare the ideological façade which television tried daily to construct:

But the great shame is in the years, the works which are written for the drawer, the enjoyment which an attentive viewer can experience while listening to a good piece of work. The years race ahead and aesthetic values disappear. Our dramatic arts, our opera, our film have reached a point of deep loss. It is because the presentation of work is decided upon by people who, without having the qualifications for it, decide whether to publish that book or that one, they run amok in books already written, crossing out the names of the living, rendering them the dead, and all that only so they can hold onto their power. I know that these things are not written about in the press, but do not imagine that people are not informed in detail about each of your decisions, about the financial standards of your elite, about their private lives ... And you, my dear comrade, share a part

³² The letter is stamped anonymous although it is clearly signed with the name Horymir Habranek, Praha: I am assuming, therefore, that that name was deemed false.

*in the grand lies, lies about the best democracy, lies about the rule of the workers, lies about a genuine love for our state.*³³

While the anonymous letters sent in had no genuinely serious implications for television or the Party other than as a gauge for public opinion, they were at least a small contradiction of two of the most important ideological precepts during *normalization*: passivity and non-politicization as key characteristics for correct citizenship. Dietl's series tried to convey both passivity and non-politicization as entertainingly as possible.

Contrary to many preconceptions about *samizdat* literature, underground journals did take up such themes as Dietl and his television series for the reason that those who lived in the CSSR at this time recognized the influence of state-sanctioned cultural production and practice. Thus, in the *samizdat* journal *Kritický sborník*, pseudonymous T.V. Schauer,³⁴ wrote a short essay about a recent plot twist in Dietl's series *A Hospital on the Edge of Town*. The plot twist in question centered on an episode in which a false accusation was made against a doctor by one of his patients. Schauer commented: "The episode is put together with Dietl's bravura; the author of the complaint is as unsympathetic as possible (greengrocer Mrs. Zazvorkova), the viewer knows that the complaint is ridiculous - he saw the self-sacrificing nature of the whole hospital collective with his own TV-eyes. Despite that - or rather because of that - he will be taught that even such complaints do not end up in the wastepaper basket."³⁵ Schauer argued that the point of the series was "without a doubt to rehabilitate the hearsay and experiences encountered in socialist health care and to renew the broken public trust in doctors."³⁶

A response to Schauer's essay, published in the following issue of *Kritický sborník*, was written by a female author who signed herself as "KO." KO accused Schauer of propagating the "Dietl vision"³⁷ which insisted on the powerlessness of citizens in communism. She concluded by asking how Schauer could possibly make the claim that Dietl's series *A Hospital on the Edge of Town* was "nonpolitical:"

³³ Fond Ve-2; box 56; c. 316 [CT APF].

³⁴ The name is intended as a humorous pseudonym since it means "TV watcher" in German.

³⁵ SCHAUER, T. V. Vina doktoru Leroye a Strosmajera. *Kritický sborník* 3, no. 2, 1983, p. 80. [Libri Prohibiti Archive; from hereon referred to as "LPA"]

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 80.

³⁷ KO, Jeste k vine doktoru Leroy a Strosmajera. *Kritický sborník* 3, no. 3, 1983, p. 94 [LPA].

"Was not one of his [Dietl's] intentions to show that there's no point in thinking about some things because we can't have any influence over them anyway?"³⁸

They are both right. Dietl's specific goal for the series was probably to recreate a trust between patient and doctor on the television screen which could translate back into real life. Moreover, *A Hospital on the Edge of Town* also became a great success in West Germany, which even commissioned a second part to the series. The Party glowed with pride over this cultural coup, pointing to the envy felt by West Germans when watching the sort of humane medical care imparted by doctors in socialist societies.³⁹ But in more general terms, Dietl's goal certainly was to produce a vision of life as beyond the control of its citizens.

The dissident and writer Karel Pecka, in another *samizdat* journal called *Obsah*, enlarged on this point in an essay on the last of Dietl's television creations called "Chef Svatopluk's Hesitations" (*Rozpaky kuchare Svatopluka*). The series was about a young chef named Svatopluk Kuratko whose only wish was to get on with his life and work as honestly and effectively as he could. Throughout the series, he is forever hindered in pursuing this wish by colleagues who drink, giggle, steal and lie. With each new challenge, he must decide how to proceed - whether, for example, to turn in the thief, to fire the drunk, to say "no" to his lying boss.

In his essay, Pecka first explained the ideological underpinnings of the series: "The basic framework is similar to all of the previous Dietl series; the optimistic hero, filled with personal priorities such as a sense of honor, fairness and progressiveness, who overcomes more or less banal obstacles so that he can eventually find moral victory within the plans of real socialism's program's themes."⁴⁰ But in this series there was one major difference from past television series; a live audience watched the episode during which there were six moments at which the screen froze and Chef Svatopluk had to make a decision about whether to do or not to do something, whether to say or not to say something. Pecka explained further: "They [the audience members] can choose between yes-no and their opinion they can express by pressing down on an apparatus with which they are provided. Furthermore even viewers at home take part in the plebiscite; they flick their lights on or off and according to the use of electricity it is then decided how the story will con-

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³⁹ KOVARIK, Jan. Velky uspech a ohlas. *Rude pravo*, 3 June 1980, p. 5 [OSA].

⁴⁰ PECKA, Karel. Svoboda a zradlo. *Obsah*, no. 6, 1985, p. 1 of 2 pages [no numbered pages] [LPA].

tinue within the realm of yes-no."⁴¹ In other words, here was interactive, audience-participation television which took into consideration not only the opinions and wishes of the live studio audience but also the viewers watching at home who were taking on the responsibility in helping Chef Svatopluk. Together, the live and the at-home audiences would help shape socialist man packaged in the form of the Chef.

Pecka pointed out that in theory this concept of interactive participation and voting would suggest that Czechoslovak Television had had to film a great number of variations. But, in fact, the sequence about which the audience is asked to make a decision is then finished off very quickly - according to whether the answer was yes or no - and the story continues as it would have either way. He points to how familiar this scene is: "In general then, the decision-making of the viewers is really irrelevant, their part in the development of the story line nil, their freedom to vote a mystification and its relevance, assuming they take it seriously, only laughter for the manipulators." Pecka pointed out sarcastically that there was one saving grace left: that just as the camera spanned over the many delicacies on exhibit in the television series about a chef, and "when the waiter flambées some meats and perfectly serves up the menu, one begins to salivate. The viewer, exhausted by the demanding collaboration, under the weight of that responsibility heads for the fridge, where he searches for a reward for his sainted services. All in all, why spend time dwelling on freedom, when the main thing is that there's lots of grub to be had."⁴² Thus, in his television swan song, Dietl offered to his viewers (and so reinforced) the very same deal offered by the *normalization* authorities to their citizens soon after the Warsaw Pact invasion: the images and satisfactions of a comfortable standard of living in

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp.1-2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 2. During the past couple of years, there has been a discussion in the Czech Republic about whether to rebroadcast some of these popular *normalization* series: older viewers would like to see them again out of nostalgia while younger viewers are drawn to them as "camp" cult classics. With much debate centered on the possible rebroadcasting of the crime series *Major Zeman*, Czech Television has stated that it would only re-present the series "sensitively" by preceding each episode with a documentary on the real history which the communist era show aimed to obscure. Interestingly, however, the rebroadcasting in 1998 of Dietl's last series, *Chef Svatopluk's Hesitations*, brought forth few objections and was in fact presented straight-faced with a panel of small-time celebrities, experts, and businessmen offering cocktail-party wisdoms about what Chef Svatopluk should or should not do during each of the six decision points per episode. The panel was emceed by the actors who had played the roles of Chef and Mrs. Svatopluk in the 1980s series.

return for political passivity.⁴³ In this way one can see that Dietl was a loyal servant of his employer, the Party. He televised "living within the lie."

The Contradictions Behind the Scenes

Dietl was already a successful television writer before 1968. That is why the Party at the onset of *normalization* recognized the need to employ his talents again for the skillful television portrayal of its ideological message. There was, however, an initial obstacle to hiring Dietl. Jaroslav Dietl had participated in the cultural hoorah of Prague Spring. In fact, already in 1964, at the very start of the reform period, he had written a play entitled *A Girl for his Excellency, Comrades*. It was a scathingly humorous parody of the duplicity and artifice of Party thinking. The script was assigned to the members of the Ideological Commission at a 1964 meeting with the expectation that they would grant it permission to be staged. The Commission's opinion, however, was that, having read the script, they could not possibly recommend it for public performance: "The play in its current form cannot under any condition be shown - considering its basic questionable political ideological conclusions - ..." ⁴⁴ It was hardly a startling verdict since the play was one joke after another - and one did not need to read between the lines to get the punch-line - about the stupidity and complacency of the Czechoslovak Communist Party.

But the fast pace of liberalization soon would overrule the Party's decision and work that had been banned just a few years earlier appeared now in the uncensored heyday of 1968. By 1969 Dietl's Prague Spring era work posed a problem both for him and for the Party which needed him. For Dietl to be able to work in television and for Czechoslovak Television to use Dietl without fear of being called to account for his political past and the appropriateness of his prominence on *normalization's* stage, Dietl would have to perform a public self-criticism. This was the passport back into official favor; a self-criticism was performed by many people who chose to return to the Party. These self-criticisms could be apologetic articles in the press or else a statement of error and apology made to one's colleagues during

⁴³ The 1968 reform-communist and later dissident Milan Simecka described the *normalization* deal in the following and, I think, accurate way: "Czechoslovak propaganda quite literally unfurled a banner with the proverbial side of pork as its standard." Simecka, Milan. *The Restoration of Order: The Normalization of Czechoslovakia*, London: 1984, p. 138.

⁴⁴ Meeting of the Ideological Commission December 7, 1964; UV KSC fond 10/5; sv. 14; aj. 57; bod 1a. [SUA].

an office meeting. But the more public a person was, the more public his/her self-criticism had to be.⁴⁵

Dr. Balasova, the familiar television deputy director, was assigned by the Cultural Division of the Central Committee to arrange with Dietl for his public self-criticism. Since it also would have to be palatable to television viewers - that is, Dietl's fans - as well as to the less forgiving Party leadership, Balasova and Dietl agreed to do the self-criticism in the form of an interview following the popular television show called *Bakalari*⁴⁶ on which Dietl was at the time working as one of the writers. Balasova made sure to discuss the whole self-criticism-cum-interview at a meeting with the Central Committee's Cultural Division which also the head of culture, Miroslav Muller, attended. Those present at the meeting made some corrections in the self-criticism script presented to them by Balasova, and then gave the go ahead. The form and content were adhered to throughout the broadcasted self-criticism interview, and everyone was seemingly content with the outcome.⁴⁷

But then two years later in 1974, Oldrich Svestka, a powerful member of the Central Committee, sent the television director Zelenka a report from 1972. This 1972 report about Dietl's self-criticism originally had been written for and sent to Milos Jakes (who was spearheading the purge and who in 1987 would take over from Gustav Husak as General Party Secretary). The report claimed that Dietl's self-criticism consisted of his "complimenting himself on his work on *Bakalari*, and [explaining] that this work had helped him to realize much faster some mistakes that he had allowed himself in the past, and that he was referring to some work that

⁴⁵ The Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal, once he had made the decision to again publish officially, was forced to do the same.

⁴⁶ The immensely popular television show, *Bakalari*, began broadcasting in 1972. Viewers were asked to write in about some interesting incident from their daily lives; the writers for the show, one of whom was Dietl, then wrote a script based on the real-life incident. Huge numbers of letters arrived each week; topping the list of most frequent incidents were those that highlighted tensions between daughter- and mother-in-law. Many letters famously began with the phrase: I would not even confide this to my priest. Dietl was one of the show's key writers until he left in 1980; according to the show's director, who left shortly after, both their exits were reactions to the Party's demands that the episodes become more political. (For more, see the post-1989 memorabilia *Bakalari* coffee-book: HRIVNAKOVA, Olga and MORAVCOVA, Jana (eds.). *Bakalari, aneb To bych ani panu farari nerekla*. Prague: Columbus, 1997.) The show (in a new version) has again been reinstated in the post-1989 Czech Republic.

⁴⁷ Fond Ve; box 108; c. 739; report to Jakes by J. Krivanova on 4 February 1972; attached as enclosure in a letter to Oldrich Svestka from Zelenka on 20 February 1974 [CTAPF].

had reached the television screen in 1968." According to the report, not only was this rather weak for an apologetic sort of self-criticism but "[e]ven his performance sounded decidedly formal (the same as his words when he announced that he agrees with the current politics of the Party and that he's fascinated by the transformation of our villages and therefore is preparing a multi-episode series on the topic) and that this response to the control of cadre work in television demands careful attention."⁴⁸

Television director Zelenka wrote back angrily, protecting and defending himself. He added at the conclusion of his self-defense: "By the way, I must still express my opinion that for instance the self-criticism of Jiri Suchy [a popular Czech entertainer], carried out on Czech radio, was of a weaker level than the self-criticism of Jaroslav Dietl and no one said anything about that. Why is it television that is always placed under suspicion?"⁴⁹ It is surprising that Zelenka should need to ask: the reason of course was that television, by the 1970s, was a far more influential medium than radio or any other form of media for that matter.⁵⁰ It was where the socialist man's profile was to be chiseled.

In 1985 Dietl, the scriptwriter for *normalization*, unexpectedly died of a heart attack. The well-known fiction writer and dissident Ivan Klima, who had been playing tennis with Dietl just a few days before his death,⁵¹ wrote a lengthy obituary-essay about his friend for the monthly *samizdat* journal *Obsah*. In this essay,

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ According to a survey reported about in *Rolnicke Noviny*, March 26, 1975 television reached 65.6 percent of its potential audience [about 9 out of 10 families owned a television set by this time] while radio attracted a much smaller 38.6 percent. Two-thirds of collective farmers watched TV, but only a little more than one-third listened to radio broadcasts, while only 11 percent read newspapers and periodicals and 7 percent went to the cinema. The same could be said of industrial workers as far as television watching and radio listening, although their consumption of newspapers, journals, and films was greater [as quoted in the *Czechoslovak Situation Report*/20 21May 1975] [OSA].

⁵¹ Association with dissidents, while perceived as dangerous by most during *normalization* (although probably not so for Dietl whose official good standing permitted such unofficial associations), became an impressive calling card after 1989. In the coffee-book remembrances of the show *Bakalari* (see footnote above) the section on Dietl includes a large photograph of his fiftieth birthday party in 1979, presumably out in the garden behind his villa. The caption to the photograph points out all of the important guests among the twenty or so people present, including a "then long-haired Ivan Klima" although his back is turned away and no part of his face is visible to the camera.

Klima described Dietl's vocation in the following manner: "He only told stories. Usually about ordinary life. But because you can only say just so much about ordinary life, in fact especially so about ordinary life, he instead told stories about life as it should be, he told benevolent stories rather than realistic tales." In other words, Klima argued, in his television scripts Dietl gave life to the "official discourse" because ordinary life ("lived reality") was off-limits for artistic representation.

Klima declined to broach the political or ethical questions which surrounded Dietl's work and life. Dietl's scripting of "benevolent stories" had, according to Klima, less to do with Dietl's participation in the charade that was *normalization* than his natural desire for a kinder, gentler world: "He longed for people to behave less cruelly, for them to be less corrupted. He longed for a reformed and helping world. He tried to create such a world not only in his plays but also around himself."⁵² Klima was unwilling to attribute a political intention to the creation of a false television world masquerading as real, nor even to question the political convergence between how Dietl wanted the world to look and how the regime wanted it to appear.

The only allusion to anything political in the obituary-essay was in Klima's mention of Dietl's expulsion from the Party following his activities during Prague Spring. But his reentry into the Party structure was emptied of political accountability when Klima went on to explain that during *normalization*, "[Dietl] was allowed to be played because those who permit or forbid knew that they must at least entertain the nation, and someone among them - surprisingly - understood that no one can do it as well as Jaroslav Dietl." Klima's assessment of Dietl as a mere entertainer was supposedly justified on the grounds of Klima's own ignorance about this aspect of late communist everyday life. Klima wrote: "I do not own a goggle box nor elsewhere do I watch a television screen, but I know enough to know that he was our most loved author. When his *A Hospital on the Edge of Town* was playing, the streets emptied."⁵³ While no one should have to explain to others the political paths that their friends elect, here was yet another interesting contradiction which lay behind the scenes, another example of how the production of the representation was truer to life than the representation itself.

Klima, a prominent representative of the dissident scene, refused to acknowledge that Dietl's life and work - regardless of whether his intentions were good or bad - epitomized and, in fact, encouraged the pursuit of life as an enthusiastic "living

⁵² Klima, Ivan. Za Jaroslavem Dietlem. *Obsah*, no. 9, 1985, p. 3 [LPA].

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

within the lie" so key to *normalization's* stability. The "lie" embraced in the 1970s and 1980s was for the most part nothing so drastic as that during Stalinism, but rather it was emblematic of the banality of Dietl's television soap operas in which earnest, socialist-minded people joined together to thrash out and find solutions for the smaller things in life with the assumption that the larger things were safely being taken care of by the communist powers that be.

In life, Jaroslav Dietl represented ambiguities and contradictions familiar to *normalization*. In death, he came to represent a sort of bizarre ethical litmus test: everyone wanted to prove that they were *not* like Dietl. Ivan Klima's essay on Dietl in the *samizdat* journal *Obsah* ignited a long debate. The participants in that debate hailed from an unusually wide range of current political affiliations and past political lives. Their evaluations of Dietl's life were personal confessions of inner conflicts and conundrums in themselves rather than essays about Dietl's legacy that they purported to be.

Dietl's funeral, empty of former friends and colleagues, perhaps foreshadowed this. Klima began his obituary-essay in *Obsah* by describing Dietl's funeral. Klima had arrived for the funeral fifteen minutes early to ensure he had a place; he arrived and waited for the crowds to appear. They did not. He saw five actors, not even one writer, and from the official side only the director of Czechoslovak Television, Jan Zelenka, in attendance. The eulogy (read by one of Klima's former colleagues in the film industry) was confused, according to Klima. It mirrored the confusion of the media outlets which had not dared to announce the date of the funeral. Klima saw in the official bewilderment the difficulty and embarrassment which Dietl's life contradictions posed. On the one hand, Dietl had only recently been awarded the highly esteemed communist title of "Meritorious Artist" in appreciation for his services; on the other hand, he had once been expelled from the same Party which then later bestowed him with this high communist honor.⁵⁴

And yet Dietl's elected career path was really not so unique. A significant number of persons - particularly the producers of culture - had enjoyed the privileges of participation in the official structures after 1948. Beginning around 1964, they had fallen in step with the new reform ethos out of a genuine sympathy for its premises. Then, following the invasion and the return to "normalcy," they again pursued the official and now politically conservative route. There were also dissidents who had initially followed a similar path, only then to omit this last step in this typical tra-

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

jectory of the Party fold. That is, they initially supported the Party and participated in its structures, then welcomed the reform period of Prague Spring; and when evicted from the ranks of the Party in the purge following the invasion, they never tried to return. Almost by default they became dissidents of a political system and an ideology to which they had once been loyal, and which they had helped build.

To a degree, this was the case of Ivan Klima. It was more so in the case of Frantisek Pavlicek, who was the first to respond to Klima's essay on Dietl. Like Klima, the writer, producer and director Frantisek Pavlicek had known Dietl well; he had been Dietl's older colleague and boss at Czechoslovak Television thirty years earlier. But, unlike Klima, Pavlicek did not like Dietl. Pavlicek began his essay in *Obsah* (lengthier than Klima's original essay on Dietl) by first explaining why he felt compelled to write it: many years earlier (presumably in the 1950s), he had not spoken up at a writer's congress and regretted it still.⁵⁵ On the occasion of Klima's *samizdat* essay on Dietl, Pavlicek was now going to use the voice that had failed to materialize in the 1950s.

Pavlicek's main criticism of Dietl was not directly political. What Pavlicek really objected to, he wrote, was the suggestion by Klima that Dietl's work should represent an aesthetic ideal (in his essay, Klima had referred to an anonymous commentator who had once drawn a parallel between the storytelling of Dietl and that of Honoré de Balzac). Pavlicek explained that he had eventually left television because to him Dietl represented the vulgarization of art and the lowering of its standard with which he no longer wished to be associated.⁵⁶ While Pavlicek defined his objection to Dietl as an aesthetic one, it was in fact deeply political. In his criticism,

⁵⁵ Pavlicek, Frantisek. Na okraj jednoho nekrologu. *Obsah*, no. 4, 1986, p. 1 [LPA].

⁵⁶ Of course, one might well ask whether communist television in the 1950s (or any television for that matter) was not by definition a vulgarization of art. That was not, however, Pavlicek's train of thought. Pavlicek in the 1950s must have held similar views to his boss Jiri Pelikan, head of television (later replaced by Jan Zelenka), who in 1950 wrote that, "In the absence of new art, the path forward, the path toward socialism, is not possible." He went on: "Especially in an era of struggle between two worlds, a struggle which affects each person, a tenacious fight is being undertaken on the artistic front. Art is becoming a great and effective social weapon, one which influences the masses, be it to lead them forward and give them strength for the struggle or to tempt them to stray from the path and weaken them." [from *Tvorba* 19 (21 June 1950, p. 603); as quoted in Shore, Marci. Engineering in the age of innocence: a genealogy of discourse inside the Czechoslovak writer's union, 1949-67". *EEPS*, vol. 12, no. 3, Fall 1998: 405.] In this sense, perhaps, in the formative days of Czech communism there was an "un-vulgarized" art form (that which was socially conscious and dynamic) versus the "vulgarized" form (that which "tempt[s] them to stray from the path"); the ascent of Dietl meant that the latter had won out.

an antagonism was implied between the notion of a purer, truer, sincerer form of communist endeavors in the years following World War II (in which Pavlicek participated officially) in contrast to the crass communism of *normalization* (in which Dietl participated officially). Pavlicek resented the abandonment of utopian ideals during *normalization*: "The literary effort to create a televised portrayal of human fate in the manner of an ideological simplification of man and his world can lead to nowhere but its vulgarization. I remember a time when our cultural political helmsmen damned the primitiveness of series from Western media and swore that such an eyesore would not flourish on our shores."⁵⁷ For Pavlicek a vulgarization of art during *normalization* was synonymous with the vulgarization of communist ideology during *normalization*. He wanted to disassociate himself from Dietl culturally and, therefore, really also politically:

I envy Ivan [Klima] that he was connected with one of Dietl's best works about A. Dumas. Rumor connected me to (apart from work on the dialogue in Hospital) coauthorship on two series. On the series 'The Youngest of the Hamr Clan' [Nejmladsi z rodu Hamru] and 'The Man at the Townhall' [Muz na radnici]. According to one version, I was sent to Ruzyn [prison] once my participation in Hamr was discovered, according to a second version I was on the contrary released from prison for my good work on 'The Man at the Townhall.' None of this was true and thanks to my nitty-gritty aesthetic tastes I felt all of these assumptions as a disgrace. But I think that Ivan Klima did not find all the talk about his dramatic collaboration with Dietl all that pleasant either.⁵⁸

Yet the 1950s, in which Pavlicek had participated publicly, had scripted the horrors of the Slansky show trials; *normalization* more typically (although not exclusively) scripted the silliness of everyday life television series. But what one reads in Pavlicek's response to Klima's obituary of Dietl is the argument that the postwar communist idealism had had meaning while *normalization* was no more than a socialist shell with a capitalist inside - bad Western-like television series and grandiose salaries functioned as the prizes rather than the utopian dreams of the 1940s and 1950s.

Dietl's *normalization*-type cynicism was, for Pavlicek, evident in his approach to money. Pavlicek admitted that at the beginning of the 1970s Dietl really did

⁵⁷ Pavlicek, Frantisek. Na okraj jednoho nekrologu. *Obsah*, no. 4, 1986, p. 6 [LPA].

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

approach him with an offer for possible writing collaboration; Pavlicek's name of course could not appear in the credits, but he would receive a salary via Dietl: "He [Dietl] explained to me his idea for a series about the development of our agricultural branch in the last twenty years [here Pavlicek was sarcastically referring to agricultural collectivization]. I ironically turned down his offer." Dietl replied that it was unreasonable to "go against the wind;" "he spoke about the possibility to survive only if we concentrate all of our activity on the purely literary side. That at all costs it's necessary to make it back into official literature." Dietl's final corollary, according to Pavlicek, was yet more cynical: "Since events took this course, and it's not in our power to change it, he, Jaroslav, as an affirmed realist, sees the motor of future literary activity in the amount of at least one million crowns a year." Bred on the 1948 youthful and hopeful communism associated with sacrifice and high ideals, Pavlicek was quick to suggest that Dietl's salary satisfied "a strong need to prove himself to be above his environment including in his standard of living."⁵⁹ Pavlicek finally commented that Dietl more than deserved the official state funeral that he never received. The Party owed it to him because, "[s]everal times during the week he gathered millions of viewers in front of the television set and placed a band-aid of pleasant fictions upon their itchy rash of discontent."⁶⁰

The next participant in the *samizdat* debate in the *Obsah* journal was someone who signed himself only as "PHA." PHA identified himself as one of the "people from within the structure." He wrote to say that he could not understand the recent fluctuations in moral certitude among the dissidents: "All of a sudden they [the dissidents] are full of conciliatory feelings. Toward everything and everyone." PHA had been moved to write because, he explained, conciliatory feelings toward Dietl were excessive even for him, a member of the official structure.

PHA started off his essay by admitting that because he belonged to the official structure, he was to some extent accountable. Logically, then, PHA should have been pleased that Dietl was being judged so generously; if Dietl was judged generously by Klima, it could only mean that he, PHA, would be judged still more generously if and when that time came. And yet PHA's argument is that Dietl *should* be judged more harshly still, while at the same time not all participants in the official structure should be seen as yet another "Dietl."⁶¹

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁶¹ PHA, De mortuis nihil nisi bene...? *Obsah*, no. 6, 1986, p. 1. [LPA].

Although existing in vastly different circumstances from the dissident Pavlicek, PHA cited similar reasons for writing in response to Klima's essay on Dietl: PHA would regret it if he did not speak up now; PHA wished to offer the personal knowledge he had about Dietl's life and work; PHA wanted to disassociate himself from Dietl. According to PHA, Dietl "managed to create a whole culture, if we measure it according to what the nation consumes. Even he who never read a single book, the last tractorist in Dolni Lhota, watched his series."⁶² He quoted Klima's line that "some considered his [Dietl's] plays as courageous," and commented:

And Ivan Klima doesn't want to judge! I would gladly meet one person who would find in Dietl something courageous, something polemical about the times. He created illustrated stories, approved by a whole array of Party top brass. He used to go to them at the Central Committee and they used to go to the editing and to the projections ... [He] manufactured agreement between the nation and the regime, he presented this agreement in pictures, fascinating pictures, which clung to and resonated in people ... His series in this way functioned as artificial history, in one case [a reference to the most political of the soap opera series about the life of a regional Party Secretary] replete with anniversaries and congresses ... Jaroslav Dietl was a person who did more for the communist regime after 1970 than all of the congresses and plenums of the Central Committee together. He created a substitute world, the kind which the Party needed ... He created a false world, a false Czech nation, false stories and history. And from that moment on the Party representatives could say: But I told you that's how it looks here!⁶³

Although PHA only revealed that he belonged to the official structures, his attack on Dietl suggested a more intimate knowledge of the higher structures at Czechoslovak Television:

I myself experienced, there, "within the structure", how representatives of television as well as the Party congratulated themselves how many more television consumers were added to their troops during each series ... They saw in them natural new consumers of television news ... [Dietl] told them [his viewers'] schemata, which the Party representatives for television and culture in the Central Committee dictated to him into his notebook

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

*(literally!). Schemata, which they could in no time change around (and which were indeed frequently changed) to the models, the forms particularly suitable for ordinary people: how to live, how to behave, how to approach politics ... until that final one [television series]: how to like your regional Party Secretary.*⁶⁴

According to PHA, Dietl soothed his conscience by dipping into opposition circles for his pick of friends. Not only were there his dissident friends, there were also his fans. PHA speculated that the regime did not dare to publicly announce the date of Dietl's funeral because it feared the spontaneous gathering of crowds and mourning that might well have outnumbered the un-spontaneous crowds on May Day.

PHA insisted on exposing the contradictions in Dietl's life, and then followed that up with references to the contradictions in the lives of his dissident readership. Concluding, he again remarked on the recent tendency within dissident circles to be conciliatory "including toward one's past about which no one wants to talk." He was referring, of course, to Klima's own past flirtations with Marxism, as well as that of many other dissidents. PHA ended with a rebuke - everyone from "within the structure" should be judged individually: "Everyone separately, honestly! And we will judge you."⁶⁵ Although PHA did not stand up as a moral authority, the essence of his remarks was valid: that behind the moral steadfastness of the dissidents during the 1970s and 1980s lay the ambiguities and contradictions which he himself confronted currently as a member of the official structure.

Three issues later, the last of the respondents' essays appeared. This one was penned by Karel Pecka who, the year before, had written insightfully about imaginary voting rights versus genuine food-consumption rights present in Dietl's last television series about a chef and similarly present in everyday life in *normalization*. Pecka's lengthy contribution to the Dietl debate was no longer concerned with Dietl's life and work nor with Dietl's legacy. Pecka was writing directly to PHA, the man from "within the structure," and the essay was titled "Rectitude is the Dream of the Hunchbacked."⁶⁶

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p. 3.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 4.

⁶⁶ Actually, in many ways substantiating one of PHA's criticisms that the dissident circles were closed ghettos, Pecka explained at the outset of his essay why he would not even touch on the other two essays about Dietl. The reason was that both Klima's and Pavlicek's essays,

Of all the participants in the *samizdat* debate about Dietl in *Obsah*, it was Karel Pecka who had the most impressive dissident credentials. An author who mined his own life for stories, Pecka had never been in the Party and had suffered greatly as a result, including a long sentence in the 1950s at the Jachymov uranium mines. Pecka began his address to PHA pondering the phrase "within the structure" which, he wrote, he increasingly was hearing these days. He wondered what it meant, especially when used in the following sense: "For instance: Although he's in the structure, he doesn't inform, he reads *samizdat* and even pays twice as much for it." In reflecting on the question of somebody "belonging to the structure," Pecka went on to point out that structure had meant different things at different times. "Structure" was different during Hitler's occupation, different during Stalinism and then later reform communism; now, during *normalization*, "structure" was more in line with what was known elsewhere as management. Today's structure, Pecka wrote, was filled with realists who sold their consciences and their souls in return for what it was that they desired - "material ownership, technical innovations, personal success, money or power."⁶⁷ They did what they had to do and it was "the absence of firm evaluative criteria" that lead them "to a confused way of thinking." PHA was to Pecka an example of that "confused way of thinking."⁶⁸

Pecka was in some ways returning to the notion of *normalization* as a banal sort of evil (manager oppressors in ties). But, he argued, these "managers" were all one of the same: he repeated a joke frequently told by Jan Werich, one member of a much-loved interwar Czech cabaret duo: "There is a barrel of pickles, and one of the pickles keeps shouting: 'I'm not sour, I'm not sour!' But of course he is."⁶⁹ People from the structure, Pecka argued, (and "structure," he noted, unlike a television set, cannot be switched off), were pickling in their own vinegar. Was not "the structure," therefore, more of a ghetto than the dissident world, he concluded.⁷⁰

But Pecka's rectitude about clearly circumscribed lies and truths begins to waver. His essay - just like that of Klima, Pavlicek, and PHA before him - collapsed into a

while expressing very different sentiments about Dietl, had their integrity, and the two authors had already decided on a "gentleman's agreement" to leave it at that. The image that comes to mind is certainly that of a gentleman's club which bears its own rules, made possible by the frequent social interaction and the assumed mutual respect of its members.

⁶⁷ Pecka, Karel. Rovnost je sen hrbatych. *Obsah*, no. 9, 1986, p. 2 [LPA].

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 3.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* p. 4.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p. 5.

discussion about personal political boundaries and difficult moral choices faced each day during the period of communism. While Pecka does not need to account for his own past, he felt compelled to answer for his friends' pasts which PHA sought to expose. Yet it became a rather convoluted argument, somewhat reminiscent of PHA's when he argued in his essay for his own moral innocence by enlarging on Dietl's moral guilt. Similarly, Pecka wanted to point out that PHA's remarks were driven by a sense of guilt about his own life. But to argue this, Pecka ended up referring to his own friends and their sense of guilt about their past political lives. Pecka thus confided:

When meeting with acquaintances and friends (some of them until recently Marxists), a question frequently comes up: "How is it you didn't belong to the Party? And how is it that I did? Surely you couldn't have been able to tell straight off what it was all about!" And then there follows the nailing down of who was how old in 1945 and 1948. "It was only a fluke that I was lecturing at the university or working at the Teheran embassy, and that you were mining uranium in Jachymov." In some cases it reaches an interesting shift where I feel almost guilty that I had the luck to serve practically eleven years in that seclusion, distanced from all the revolutionary changes and the need to somehow respond to them. But there is one thing I will not pretend - that this was some sort of accident.⁷¹

As a student Pecka had been approached to enter the Party and had refused; his refusal put him onto a path which logically led to Jachymov. According to Pecka, you *were* able to know what communism was going to be all about, even in 1945. But in trying to point out that PHA consciously made the bed in which he slept, Pecka also needed to point out that many of his fellow dissidents consciously made their communist beds in which they slept during the Stalinist 1950s. But Pecka claimed to understand his former-Marxist friends because they at least wished to improve their world, while PHA wanted only to manage it. We return again to Pavlicek's critique made earlier during the debate in *Obsah*; the ideals of post-WWII communist belief had given way to *normalization* cynicism, and although overall greater crimes had been committed in the name of the earlier phase of communism, it was this latter phase which was to be judged more harshly.

By the end of the debate carried out on the pages of the *samizdat* journal *Obsah*, a determinedly apolitical tribute to the television script writer Jaroslav Dietl by his

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

friend and dissident Ivan Klima had turned into the most political of exposés. Ethical credentials were paraded out, chest-beating was undergone, and eventually everyone (regardless of their political background) agreed on one thing: they themselves never collaborated to the extent that Dietl did.

Conclusion

In his most famous essay, *The Power of the Powerless*, Vaclav Havel familiarized readers with the character of the Czech greengrocer who, paying little attention to his actions and their consequences, like clockwork each year placed a political banner in his shop window when asked to do so. By complying with this request, and moreover by never paying attention to the words on the banner which he exhibited unblinkingly, the greengrocer continued to live "within the lie." For a person to "live within the lie" meant going through the motions of a ritualized everyday existence under late communism. The greengrocer lived "as if;" as if the world constructed by communist ideology and maintained by it really did exist rather than the quite different reality which surrounded the greengrocer on a daily basis.

It was Dietl's job, and Dietl's talent, to take the same greengrocer that Havel critiqued and present him surrounded, even glamorized, by the details of that everyday life. Concerns which wrinkled the brow of Dietl's greengrocer were not issues of personal freedom and authenticity, but questions about whether the vegetables he had ordered from the supplier would arrive in time for his Friday customers, whether his wife would like the birthday present of French perfume he had acquired with the help of a friend (but which would prove to be no better than a Czech perfume), whether his grandchildren would enjoy their skiing holiday in the Tatra mountains.⁷² He made "living within the lie" feel good, or at least mutual and less alienating than it was. Dietl's greengrocer was the twin brother of Havel's greengrocer, except that Dietl's greengrocer conjured up none of the self-reflection

⁷² Actually, Dietl's one fictional greengrocer, in his television series *The Woman Behind the Counter* [*Zena za pultem*], was a woman with a stutter who became empowered when promoted to head greengrocer at the fancy new supermarket in which the series was set. She was applauded for presenting capitalist marketing strategies under the guise of initiative socialism: i.e., it was she who came up with the successful idea to offer both older apples at a discount alongside the newer apples at full price rather than continue the earlier practice of not offering the newer apples until the old had been sold, by which time the new apples, of course, would be old. The greengrocer, according to Dietl, was to solve socialism's practical problems rather than dwell on her/his personal freedom.

which Havel's demanded. PHA, the man from "within the structure" who felt compelled to add something to the dissidents' debate, wrote: "[W]e are all one television family, joined together by Jaroslav Dietl. The unity of the Party and of the people found in Jaroslav Dietl its creator."⁷³ Indeed, Dietl wrote one television series after another in which he put into words and pictures the ritualization of everyday life, the pleasures of pretense as belief, the satisfaction of jettisoning political will.⁷⁴ But what makes Dietl's work interesting is the contradictions which surrounded it.⁷⁵

The production of ideology through television was meant to use the "signs" readily available in *normalized* Czechoslovakia and construct with them a representation of how "real socialism" (as everyday life was officially called by the regime) was supposed to look, how socialist man/woman was supposed to behave. Yet, as Jan Zelenka, the post-Prague Spring director of Czechoslovak Television confessed to the Ideological Commission of the Central Committee, not only were people refusing to watch the television news but, worse still, the medium of television itself was riddled with the contradictions and paradoxes which the signs themselves possessed. Television needed to present a bright future without suggesting a bourgeois

⁷³ PHA, De mortuis nihil nisi bene...? *Obsah*, no. 6, 1986, p. 3 [LPA].

⁷⁴ The last thing Dietl would ever let his television characters do was to spend their evenings painting placards for the May Day parade in which they had been assigned to march; even his politician characters were very unpolitical. I agree with Slavoj Žižek's comment that the last thing the late communist regimes would have wanted was for their citizens to actually act out communism. Cf. Boynton, Robert S. Enjoy your žizek!" *Linguafranca*, October 1998, pp. 44-5.

⁷⁵ I think an analysis solely of these television programs would be limiting because they would indicate only general observations about images and political ideologies. For example, Eric Rentschler, in his interesting book on Nazi cinema, begins with a number of premises which could just as well apply to *normalization* and television. "Premise 1: The cinema of the Third Reich is to be seen in the context of a totalitarian state's concerted attempt to create a culture industry in the service of mass deception." [p. 16]; "Premise 2: Entertainment played a crucial political role in Nazi culture." [p. 16]; "Premise 3: Nazi film culture - and Nazi propaganda in general - must be understood in terms of what Goebbels called an 'orchestra principle'...an array of orchestrated diversions...imbued the everyday with an aura of drama and excitement, organizing work and leisure time, occupying physical and psychic space, and thus militating against alternative experience and independent thought." [p. 20]; "Premise 4: It is by now a truism that we cannot speak of National Socialism without speaking about aesthetics. I think we must also speak about mass culture." [p. 21] Rentschler, Eric. *The ministry of illusion*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.

future; television needed to begin addressing critical problems but without making it seem that the Party had lost control of the situation.

The person brought in to assemble these signs without exposing their contradictions and paradoxes more than was necessary was Jaroslav Dietl. Overall, he managed to do so while at the same time entertaining the nation. As in the case of the series *The Man at the Townhall*, he even dared to blur the line between fiction and fact so much so that he used the architectural destruction of the real town of Beroun as a "live" set for his series, applauding the socialist trend toward uniform high-rise apartment dwellings. But for all of this, it was Dietl's own life, when laid open, which suggested an array of the sort of contradictions he was hired to mask. Moreover, the masking of his own contradictions involved a necessary public self-criticism not scripted by him, the master scriptwriter, but instead by the Central Committee of the Party, which he had belittled and parodied in the more liberal, reform-minded 1960s.

The contradictions suggested in Dietl's life and work further ignited discussions about ethics and politics in the pages of the underground press. Members of dissent wrote about Dietl's television creations when he was alive, and then about Dietl when he had died. He became a measure of one's own collaboration and, compared against Dietl, everyone seemed to come out on top: Dietl, with pen in hand, had, it seemed, orchestrated *normalization*. But, of course, he would never have struck so strong a chord if his life did not lay open the complexities of political and cultural collusion, and if his work did not illustrate how ingrained and even enjoyable Havel's comatose greengrocer's life had become for so many people during *normalization*.

The socialist unity of everyday life portrayed through Dietl's television series was as much a lie as the idea that the regime was a monolith, and that opposition was a united front without internal conflicts, and that the "official" and the "unofficial" lay unmoving, un-interacting in their opposing trenches. An analysis of television (and everything that went into it) in the envisioning of *normalization* suggests that we can begin to understand better the last decades of Czech communism only by questioning the "official" versus "unofficial" paradigm. This paradigm is little different from a Dietl television series: at first glance it seems true to the situation, but a deeper inquiry reveals its inherent contradictions.

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