

An Artificial Unity? Approaches to Post-Socialist Nostalgia

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Abstract

'Post-socialist nostalgia' has been used as an umbrella term to describe a number of disparate and at times contradictory phenomena. Given the often opposing notions of what is meant by the designation, this paper interrogates to what extent post-socialist nostalgia is still a valid term and examines whether it imposes an artificial unity on heterogeneous approaches and concepts that could more fruitfully be described by a variety of more specific terms. The contribution argues that established typologies of nostalgia are not necessarily a productive way of thinking about the phenomenon. Drawing on examples from the Czech Republic, this paper makes a case for viewing post-socialist nostalgia not as a set of categories, but as a collection of tools and mechanisms which can be observed in nostalgic texts, as well as, more significantly, in their reception.

Keywords: Post-socialist nostalgia, retro, Czech Republic, *Pelíšky*, *Major Zeman*

Film comedies set during socialism in Czechoslovakia, the continued popularity of socialist-era television series and pop music, the reinvention of the socialist era shoe brand *Botas* as trendy retro-chic and hip design that appropriates everyday objects from the socialist period. These disparate and seemingly unrelated phenomena have one thing in common: they have all come to be designated under the term 'post-socialist nostalgia'. The term denotes nostalgia for the period of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe, which developed after the collapse of Communist party-dominated regimes in the region from 1989 onwards. The use of such a label would suggest that

this diverse array of representations, practices, events, and objects shares some kind of fundamental characteristic. But does this term not impose an artificial unity where there is in fact little common ground? This article will draw on contemporary examples from the Czech Republic to interrogate to what extent the label of post-socialist nostalgia is a useful and productive way of thinking about a range of practices and representations which look back to the period of socialism between 1948 and 1989 in Czechoslovakia. The aim will be to query the notion of nostalgia as a set of categories into which individual examples can be grouped. I will examine an alternative way of viewing nostalgia: as a mechanism which representations and practices employ, without necessarily becoming nostalgic in and of themselves. The aim of this paper is thus to offer a change of emphasis on how post-socialist nostalgia can be thought about, shifting the focus away from the characteristics of nostalgic artefacts and practices and towards particular effects and responses that they generate.

Despite a growing literature on the subject, the specificities of what makes post-socialist nostalgia different to nostalgias not associated with the region are rather ill-defined. Neil Munro proposes that ‘nostalgia may be defined as a positive view of the past regime, based on a holistic evaluation of its faults and merits. It should be distinguished from reaction – a desire to return to the status quo ante’ (Munro, 2006: 3). Munro’s definition, however, sets too broad a requirement for what can be considered nostalgic. As I will demonstrate, nostalgic representations and practices rarely take the past regime as a whole as their object, but rather only certain aspects of it, while easily condemning, or simply not addressing others. The definition therefore requires modification: post-socialist nostalgia generates a positive relation towards a certain aspect of the socialist past.

What may initially be puzzling about the concept of nostalgia for Eastern Bloc socialism, as Fred Davis points out in his landmark study, is its unlikely object: ‘almost anything from our past can emerge as an object of nostalgia, provided that we can somehow view it in a pleasant light. (This effectively eliminates from nostalgia’s universe such grotesque possibilities as a “nostalgia” for the ovens at Auschwitz or for the bomb at Hiroshima)’ (Davis, 1979: viii). For critics of post-socialist nostalgia, herein lies their main objection: that it is inappropriate and even unethical to be nostalgic for regimes that were undeniably responsible for much injustice and suffering. Yet what such views disregard is that it is possible to be nostalgic only for certain aspects of a period, not the period as a whole. An important trope in nostalgic representations in the Czech context is what I will here term ‘petty heroism’. This refers to a nostalgia for a time when there was clearly something to fight against and when even a sub-standard joke could make an individual a temporary, local hero, because the joke itself, rather than its content, constituted an act of resistance. Representations that make use of this trope do not shy away from the more negative aspects of the socialist regime – they by no means wish to recreate the circumstances of the previous political order, but generate a nostalgic investment in one specific aspect of the period. The unpleasant features of life under socialism are necessary to creating this kind of nostalgia: heroic gestures are defined in contradistinction to the regime’s oppression.

For example, Petr Šabach's 2006 novella *Občanský průkaz* (The Identity Card) is loosely structured around the narrator's and his friends' encounters with the police through their teenage years and into adulthood. In the clashes of the protagonists with the police, there is never any question on whose side the reader is to stand – together with the characters, the reader takes a stance resistant to communist authority. Despite this central theme, which does not immediately suggest itself as a natural object of nostalgia, the text generates a nostalgic mood through a longing for the days of petty heroism that could bring one appreciation in one's peer group.

Discussions of post-socialist nostalgia have often had to reach out to broader theories of the phenomenon which are not specific to the region. Such established typologies of nostalgia often elide the key issue that only certain aspects of practices or representations can have nostalgic connotations – instead, they imply that a text or practice either is or is not nostalgic, grouping it into a category. Svetlana Boym's distinction differentiates two types of nostalgia: the reflective and the restorative: 'Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, in longing itself, and delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately' (Boym, 2001: xviii). Boym's categories, however, appear static, offering a description of nostalgia's characteristics, rather than elucidating how it operates. Fredric Jameson, too, has categorised nostalgia, defining the 'nostalgia film' as a picture that approaches 'the "past" through stylistic connotation, conveying "pastness" by the glossy qualities of the image, and "1930s-ness" or "1950s-ness" by the attributes of fashion (...)' (Jameson, 1991: 19). Both Boym and Jameson use nostalgia as a label, which is attached to an artefact or practice. Christine Sprengler hints at the potential conceptual difficulty this poses when she observes that 'mobilizing the term "nostalgia film" as a generic category also makes it difficult to include the seemingly marginal yet compelling uses of a single prop or specific actor for engaging and evoking nostalgia' (Sprengler, 2009: 67). This insight becomes particularly pertinent to discussing the way post-socialist nostalgia operates.

Some critics have pointed out that categorisations of nostalgia can lead to drawing a facile distinction between 'good' and 'bad' forms of the phenomenon.¹ According to Alastair Bonnett, scholars such as Boym or Davis, who define three 'orders' of nostalgia based on their degree of self-reflexivity (Davis, 1979: 18-24), generally privilege ironic forms of nostalgia, as these create a sense of distance from their object. They thus implicitly establish hierarchies that 'rely on a characteristically modern sense of discomfort with the past' (Bonnett, 2010: 43). Bonnett points to the main fault line in conceptions of nostalgia, namely that of irony. Ironic forms of nostalgia are usually read as a postmodern phenomenon: they are concerned with surface and style and are seen as more progressive by virtue of their self-reflexive quality, while the earnestness of non-ironic forms of nostalgia appears reactionary.

However, the idea that irony is always employed towards progressive political ends is questionable. A closer look at certain nostalgic representations, which lend themselves to ironic readings, reveals that irony can easily be

harnessed towards conservative purposes. For example, the Czech retro comedy *Pelíšky* (Cosy Dens, dir. Jan Hřebejk, 1999), a family tale recounting the everyday troubles of two families living in the same house in 1960s Prague, employs certain stylistic markers that could easily be seen as more 'reflective' ironic retro. The viewer revels in the deficiency of socialist objects, which acquire a retrospectively 'hip' status, such as the protagonist's hideous socialist-made boots. However, like in Šabach's stories of petty heroism, the narrative structure of the film guides the viewer, as Kamil Fila has observed, towards a primitive anti-communism, where the audience engages in moral apologetics: communists are always the caricatured 'other' (Fila, 2012: 58).

Nostalgia for the socialist period and right-wing politics which reaffirm the status quo are thus easily reconciled. As Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko propose, 'the task of distinguishing between "bad" and "good" cases of post-socialist nostalgia has to be reformulated into the task of exploring the distinction between the nostalgic practices themselves and the political causes to which these practices may or may not contribute' (Nadkarni and Shevchenko, 2004: 505). Retrospective nostalgic representations like *Pelíšky*, which employ an aestheticised mode, ostensibly invest in an apolitical portrayal of the everyday, focusing on the material universe of the period. But such apolitical nostalgia extends a political gesture: a refusal to engage with the past through any other means than its surface, which suggests that the political task of coming to terms with the past has been accomplished as far as the filmmakers are concerned, thus reaffirming the present. Equating ironic mechanisms with 'good' nostalgia is thus not necessarily a productive way of thinking about the phenomenon.

Paul Grainge hints at the complexity involved when he notes that 'nostalgia has no prescribed political orientation. It can be engaged by dominant and subordinate groups alike and used for ends that are enabling as much as disabling, progressive as well as reactionary' (Grainge, 2006: 26). Grainge thus begins to approach nostalgia as a tool, moving towards what it does rather than what it is. His typology offers a further useful distinction between what he terms 'mood' and 'mode': 'in each case, a conceptual emphasis, or what might be called a main gravitational presumption, can be seen to operate. The nostalgia mood is principally defined in relation to a concept of *loss*. [...] By contrast, the nostalgia mode has no necessary relation to loss or longing. As a commodified style, the nostalgia mode has developed, principally within postmodern theory, a theoretical association with *amnesia*' (Grainge, 2006: 21). This is a useful distinction in that these are not necessarily two categories which stand in opposition to one another, but mechanisms by means of which nostalgic artefacts operate, and which are not mutually exclusive. *Pelíšky* once again serves as a good example to illustrate how a representation works with competing nostalgic tools: the film employs an aestheticised nostalgic mode to evoke a nostalgic mood. On the one hand, there is an apparent fascination with the aesthetic surface of socialism – various socialist-produced objects or the fashions the characters wear are foregrounded, both in the film's *mise-en-scène* and its narrative structure (the humour of two iconic scenes of the film is structured around objects from the period: 'unbreakable glasses' produced in Poland, which invariably break, and plastic spoons from the GDR that dissolve

in hot coffee). These can be enjoyed purely aesthetically for their ironically nostalgic retro-appeal even by audiences too young to actually remember the period. On the other hand, the film employs a nostalgic affective strategy, using the structural device of youthful reminiscence, visually marked by this aesthetic mode, to create a nostalgic mood for a lost period of adolescence, as set out in the main character's initial retrospective voiceover: 'I was almost sixteen years old, hopelessly in love (...)' (*Pelišky*, 1999). The distinction between mood and mode thus provides us with a vocabulary to speak about how nostalgia works, rather than what it is.

Czech nostalgia for socialism, however, has been equally fascinated with the popular culture of the period, as it has been with its material objects. Comedy films set during socialism are seen as vehicles for the display of period music; stars of socialist pop such as Michal David or Karel Gott continue to experience success on the music scene, and reruns of television series from the 1970s and 1980s are eagerly re-watched, as well as polemicalised over in the press.² The most debated of these was the re-screening of the 1970s crime series *Třicet případů majora Zemana* (The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman, dir. Jiří Sequens, 1976-1980) in 1999. *Major Zeman* presents a complementary case to *Pelišky*, as it introduces a further model into this investigation of the workings of nostalgia: that of reception contexts. While nostalgic mechanisms are embedded into the narrative structure of *Pelišky* itself, *Major Zeman*, loosely based on significant real-life criminal cases of the post-war era, can hardly be said to have been created as a nostalgic artefact. Yet the practice of re-watching the series in the post-socialist era has elicited nostalgic effects. Moreover, an analysis of the different responses to the series demonstrates how a single artefact can produce different nostalgic readings, which point not only to how an artefact or practice can employ competing nostalgic mechanisms, but how these are further shaped and complicated by particular reading strategies.

For defenders of this heavily ideologised series, the practice of re-watching it in the post-socialist era represents a nostalgic return to the time of their youth – this section of the audience would usually praise the high production values and general quality of the series.³ Here we see echoes of Boym's restorative nostalgia. However, categorising this practice as 'restorative' – i.e. to see the re-watching of the series as a manifestation of a desire to return in time – is too straightforward and elides the multiple layers involved in the response to the series. This 'quality narrative' emphasises that popular culture of the socialist period forms a significant part of viewers' lives, their cultural heritage, and their everyday experience, and as such it cannot be erased. At the same time, certain sections of the audience – usually younger viewers, who had not seen the series when it was originally broadcast – ironically viewed the overly politicised dialogues and stilted action as a marvellous postmodern retro artefact, which could be summarised under the slogan 'it's so bad it's good'. Yet I propose that more restorative readings of the series do not necessarily preclude ironic responses. Revisiting popular culture from the socialist period enables the viewer to also engage in a kind of retrospective heroism, namely in 'seeing through' and ironically laughing at the overly ideologised elements of a series such as *Major Zeman*. It is a reading mechanism that allows viewers, on the

one hand, to return to a site of their everyday life during socialism, but at the same time the re-viewing experience, with its inherent retrospective knowledge, affords a sense of ironic detachment, of setting oneself above the period ideology. As Kevin Platt has argued in the post-Soviet context, 'a stance of ironic distance makes it possible to take pleasure in the entertainment traditions of "the good old days" without necessarily entertaining the idea that there was anything particularly good about the Soviet era as a whole' (Platt, 2013: 449). The case of *Major Zeman* thus frustrates attempts to divide nostalgic practices into neat categories and shows how nostalgia can be invested only in very specific aspects of an artefact or practice that arises in particular reading contexts. A single artefact can, then, carry divergent nostalgic meanings: the glasses Major Zeman wears can serve as both a memory trigger, inviting personalised affective responses ('Those are the glasses my father wore'), while the viewer can equally well be aware that such glasses have nowadays been re-appropriated as trendy hipster chic. Furthermore, the example demonstrates that restorative and reflective nostalgia are not as mutually exclusive as Boym suggests – in situations like the re-watching of *Major Zeman*, wistful nostalgic reactions can mingle with more ironic enjoyments, producing a complex response where competing forms of nostalgia amalgamate.⁴

Using the above examples, I have set out to complicate the notion that post-socialist nostalgia is a unified phenomenon. The aim of this paper has been to question whether it is not possible to think of post-socialist nostalgia in other ways than as a set of categories. Such a questioning leads to a small but significant distinction: when discussing post-socialist nostalgia, it is less useful to speak of a category into which representations and practices can be grouped, rather than a set of mechanisms that representations and practices utilise. Not only do texts themselves employ nostalgic tools as in the case of *Pelíšky*, but furthermore certain reading mechanisms can generate a nostalgic response where it would be hard to argue that nostalgic tropes were inscribed into the original text in the first place, as in the case of *Major Zeman*. Therefore these texts are not necessarily nostalgic as such, but elicit nostalgic responses in certain reception situations. Thus, I propose that we can begin to move away from the artificial unity of post-socialist nostalgia as a category by speaking not about artefacts and practices as *being* nostalgic, but as achieving nostalgic effects.

Endnotes

- 1 See, for example, Nadkarni and Shevchenko, 2004: 487-519, particularly p.504, and Bonnett, 2010.
- 2 For a discussion of the continued popularity of Czechoslovak socialist popular culture, see Roberts, 2002: 764–809.
- 3 For a defence of the qualities of the series, see, for example, Radovanský, 1998: 4. For a summary of the main issues surrounding the re-screening of the series, see Kříž, 1999: 15.
- 4 I am indebted to Dorota Ostrowska and her idea of the ‘nostalgic amalgam’, as presented at the 2013 NECS Conference, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague, 21 June 2013.

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Biography

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