

# INTRODUCTION

## Returning to the Past



On a tree-lined street in Prague's upmarket district of Vinohrady, Café Kaaba invites customers to drink a coffee in an interior decorated in 'Brussels Style', the late 1950s and early 1960s wave of design that followed the success of the Czechoslovak Pavilion at the World's Fair in Brussels in 1958. Before entering, Kaaba proudly informs customers of its attitude towards the state socialist past on its door.<sup>1</sup> On a sticker with a crossed-out red circle, where one would often find the symbol of a dog to indicate that pets are not welcome, Kaaba features a crossed-out hammer and sickle. A second sticker displays crossed-out cherries, the symbol of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), in a clear message that communists are not allowed inside (Figure 0.1). The socialist-era design on show in the café is to be enjoyed not for the political era that gave rise to it, but as one of the many available styles that the free market offers. Though the interior of the café is pleasant, the disclaimer on the door suggests that this should not stimulate nostalgia for how things were in the past. Instead, it turns to an alternative line of Czech history, which sees a continuity of national culture irrespective of political regimes. The message implies a hypothetical projection of the achievements of socialism – its design – without its politics: a state socialism without communists.

Such a paradoxical attitude is emblematic of the Czech relationship to state socialism evident in many post-1989 cultural representations of the past and also holds a firm place in public discourse, conducted in the media by politicians, journalists and other commentators, as well as both state and



**Figure 0.1** The door of Café Kaaba, Prague. Photo by Prokop Jelínek.

nonstate institutions. The negotiation of this relationship, like elsewhere in the former Eastern Bloc, was one of the pressing issues that Czechoslovakia and, since 1993, the Czech Republic had to deal with after the collapse of the communist regime in the events known as the ‘Velvet Revolution’ of November 1989 and the end of the Cold War. Throughout the region, reckoning with the legacies of the rule of communist parties (under the guise of a variety of names) has had implications for legislation and the organization of the new political order after 1989 or 1991. Salvaging or condemning aspects of the previous regime has impacted the formation of collective and national identities, and various state and nonstate groups have used the past to legitimate their political aims. While many of these aspects have been addressed by political scientists, the way in which a society understands its own past is not a matter for politicians and legislative measures alone; it is through culture that particular narratives about the past are kept alive and help to structure understandings of the present. This book offers an in-depth analysis of the Czech cultural memory of state socialism. It takes retrospective representations – literature, film and television series – that arose after 1989 as a major component of the collective cultural memory of the state socialist period of 1948–89 in the Czech Republic and sets them in conversation with public debates in the first twenty-five years after the demise of the previous regime.

The time period of a quarter of a century, which this book investigates, is not chosen by chance. For the first twenty-five years after the collapse of the

previous regime, concerns with how to evaluate the period of Communist Party rule remained a ‘hot’ memory issue. Was the regime totalitarian?<sup>2</sup> Who is to be held responsible for its implementation and longevity? Was resistance against it legitimate? Such questions continued to stir commentators in the media, historians and cultural producers. Discussions intensified particularly around 17 November each year, the anniversary of the beginning of the Velvet Revolution of 1989. This date also commemorates Nazi violence against students in 1939, later observed as International Students’ Day. It was this anniversary that spurred Czechoslovak students in 1989 to hold a peaceful demonstration, which went on to spark a much wider wave of protests that eventually peacefully brought down the ruling regime, earning the revolution the epithet ‘velvet’ (in Slovakia, the same events are referred to as the ‘gentle’ revolution). Today, 17 November is observed as the Day of Struggle for Freedom and Democracy and is a national holiday in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Traditionally, the anniversary was an occasion for students, together with the former student leaders of 1989, to gather in the university district of Albertov in Prague and at Národní třída, the street where police forces brutally beat up demonstrators in 1989. They celebrated the ideals and values that the protestors had demanded and that the new order promised to deliver: democracy, freedom, plurality, openness, a return to Europe. The media would use the occasion to reflect upon the successes and failures of the Czech *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or coming to terms with the past, and to reinvigorate discussions about the continued legacies of the previous regime within society and their effects on political culture. Although minor protests would take place, in general, the anniversary was an occasion for celebrating the new democracy.

But 17 November 2014 looked different. Commemorating twenty-five years since the Velvet Revolution was marked by current political tensions when protestors threw eggs at President Miloš Zeman, whom they saw as repudiating the liberal values of the postsocialist democratic order.<sup>3</sup> A year later, the traditional gathering of students and citizens at Albertov was blocked by the police because the space had been booked out earlier by the civic initiative Block Against Islam (*Blok proti islámu*) – with President Zeman as special guest.<sup>4</sup> The celebrations of the Velvet Revolution were suddenly no longer framed by turning back to the past, but by pressing issues of the present, specifically social tensions brought about by a number of European-wide crises, among them the arrival of large numbers of refugees from Syria and other war-torn countries into Europe that year, which the President’s gathering directly addressed.

The issues these anniversaries brought to the fore were thus referenced less by the country’s authoritarian past and more by present international political

developments, marking a general departure from the preoccupation with the communist regime that had loomed large over the first decades of postsocialism. When I first became interested in the topic of cultural memory back in 2011 and started the initial research that would eventually develop into this book, it seemed that I was very much investigating ongoing and current processes. Czech Television was still airing its nostalgic soap opera *Tell Me a Story* (*Vyprávěj*, dir. Biser Arichtev, 2009–13) that brought an attractive, colourful picture of state socialism to the small screen. In the media, battles were raging over the direction that memory politics should take at the recently established Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes. In other words, the memory of the socialist past, together with a contention with its problematic aspects – such as uncovering former collaborators of the communist secret police or State Security (Státní bezpečnost (StB)) – was still very much present in the public discourse. This era symbolically came to a close not only with the shift in accent during commemorations of the Velvet Revolution, but also with the political rise of billionaire Andrej Babiš, whose pre-1989 Communist Party membership and alleged secret police collaboration gained media attention and sparked a lawsuit, but had no effect on his immense popularity with voters.<sup>5</sup> Babiš went on to become finance minister in a coalition government with the Social and Christian Democrats in 2014; in 2017, he won the parliamentary elections and became Prime Minister.

With this in mind, it is possible to say that the constant negotiation of the memory of state socialism, whether on the political or cultural level, that had marked the first twenty-five years after 1989 appears to be one of the defining features that allow us to describe this period as ‘postsocialist’ in the Czech Republic – a condition that is increasingly becoming part of the past rather than the present. Indeed, throughout the whole East-Central European region, postsocialism is being historicized from the perspectives of economic, social and intellectual history, with a number of volumes now dedicated to the wider history of Europe after 1989, as well as several monographs investigating the 1990s specifically in the Czech Republic.<sup>6</sup> The field of cultural production has so far played a less prominent role in this growing new direction of historical research; through tracing the Czech post-1989 relationship to the socialist past, this book presents not just a national case study, but also offers a different take on the history of postsocialism through the lens of cultural memory. The story that I present here is a roughly chronological one: I argue that the lapse of time since the Velvet Revolution of 1989 has brought about a progressively more polarized view on the period, but within this polarization, a plurality of memory is beginning to emerge.

This book sets out to problematize some of the established paradigms that have dominated the study of the memory of the state socialist regimes in East-Central Europe. Among these, the idea of nostalgia – a longing for

something lost – has played a prominent role. But as we will see, Czech representations of socialism complicate the idea of a positive, sentimental attachment to the past. I propose ‘retro’ as a more fruitful designation that captures a dynamic of simultaneous political rejection of the past and aesthetic indulgence combined with ironic appreciation. Yet this is not just a story of Czech particularism. Retro serves to conceptualize a set of complex memory processes that have previously been, somewhat unfairly, thrown into the same bag with nostalgia by scholars of the region. And while attending to the details of the Czech case challenges and nuances more established nostalgic narratives, at the same time, we will see that some of the cultural processes of consuming the past and appreciating it aesthetically are not necessarily linked to the experience of socialism as such. The broader relevance of this book is thus a contribution to understanding how representations and their circulation in the public sphere act as one of the major structuring forces of collective memory; its specificity lies in uncovering the different political agendas to which this memory is harnessed.

The following chapters focus on examples of popular culture – works targeting a wide audience, usually with a commercial aim, which constitute mainstream cultural production and have gained media attention. A canon of literature, film and television production portraying the times before the Velvet Revolution of 1989 has intervened in the way in which Czech state socialism has been remembered, but these cultural phenomena have received limited scholarly attention.<sup>7</sup> Although the Czech post-1989 relationship to the socialist past already has an outstanding study dedicated to it in Françoise Mayer’s *Les Tchèques et leur communisme (The Czechs and Their Communism)*,<sup>8</sup> popular culture receives only cursory mention. Instead, Mayer focuses on other contributors to public discourse, such as former dissidents, political prisoners and communists. Moreover, since the book’s publication in 2004, much has changed in the dynamics of Czech memory. This volume thus attempts to bring this story up to date.

Existing studies of specific features of cultural memory have also lacked consideration of the whole post-1989 period, yet the discourse about the socialist past has undergone substantial development during the twenty-five years in question. These cultural reactions to the past deserve attention not only because they form a significant component of the collective memory of the socialist period; the formation of this memory also comprises an important aspect of the wider processes of the systemic transformation from state socialism to liberal democracy. While my analysis aims at capturing cultural narratives that arose in the new political and social circumstances of the systemic transformation, at the same time, it also takes into account that culture industries and the inherited expectations and modes of reception of the socialist era did not disappear overnight; a consideration of cultural

continuities is thus also one of the themes picked up in the course of the chapters that follow.

This book explores mainly representations that in some way refer to the pre-1989 past, though some artefacts produced during the socialist period are also included in the analysis where their post-1989 reception triggered a particularly strong debate about the legacies of state socialism. This corpus is by no means exhaustive; I have selected specific works that thematize aspects of the past regime on the basis of their popularity and their impact in the media. The power of some of these representations in shaping the shared images of the past has been massive, to say the least. Films like *Kolja* (*Kolja*, dir. Jan Svěrák, 1996) or *Cosy Dens* (*Pelíšky*, dir. Jan Hřebejk, 1999) were seen by more than one million viewers in cinemas alone (in a country of ten million). Repeats on both public and private television channels have been innumerable. Phrases from the films have become household items. Such representations thus deserve to be treated seriously as memory-making media. For younger generations, they have often served as the first point of access to the socialist past.

Throughout the former Eastern Bloc, narratives about state socialism have to be interpreted against a background of anticommunism. A resolute rejection of the previous regime, which was responsible for a number of terrible crimes, had its necessary and legitimate place in public discourse and to varying degrees also transitional justice legislation throughout the region in the 1990s. The idea of a blanket rejection of all aspects of the socialist past aspired to hegemony after 1989 in Czech postsocialist public discourse through the actions of both politicians and the media. This book analyses how a similar dynamic manifested in the cultural sphere and, indeed, we will see that the Czech cultural memory of socialism differs from some of its neighbours in its actively anticommunist dimension. But anticommunism as one of the prominent grand narratives of the postsocialist era in the Czech Republic suffers from an internal contradiction. On the one hand, by dismissing the past, it divests responsibility and casts the present as a manifestation of obvious progress from the times of state socialism; however, on the other hand, the same anticommunist rejection also leads to the belief that communists still lurk everywhere and public life needs to be purged of them – a convenient political tool that loomed large over the postsocialist public sphere. It thus appears as if the discursive category of ‘communists’ was suppressed into the background (as in Kaaba’s vision of state socialism without communists), yet simultaneously emerged in force after 1989 to jeopardize the new liberal democracy with the communists constant threat of returning matters to the ‘old order’.<sup>9</sup>

This book primarily traces the political meanings in cultural narratives about the socialist past. Variations in these political meanings are connected

to the genres through which stories about the socialist past are told. James Krapfl demonstrates this effectively in his analysis of the 1989 events in Czechoslovakia in *Revolution with a Human Face*, arguing that narrating the revolutions of that year in different generic plots leads to differing interpretive outcomes.<sup>10</sup> Krapfl draws inspiration from Hayden White's *Metahistory*, which outlines how the same historical events recounted via different 'modes of emplotment' give rise to different meanings.<sup>11</sup> While Krapfl and White are concerned with historical events rather than fictional representations, I loosely adapt the basic insight that, analogously, the choice of literary or cinematic genre is a structuring factor in the interpretation of fictional depictions of the past. For example, retrospectively narrating a period such as Normalization – as the final two decades of state socialism in Czechoslovakia after the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion are generally known – as either comedy or tragedy generates distinct interpretations, which range from narratives of the nonparticipatory experience of the 'small person', to commentaries on a perceived democratic national identity by casting out 'totalitarian' perpetrators and setting heroes as role models. Indeed, understandings of heroism are key to the overall political interpretation of the past detectable in representations and constitute one of the central themes of the Czech cultural memory of socialism; who can be considered a hero and under what circumstances plays into how aspects of the past are valued. Comedy strives for reconciliation and, as such, presents an egalitarian vision of heroism, in which ordinary characters perform small gestures of resistance. Tragic narratives, on the other hand, tend to paint a starker moral map of the past, with clear heroic role models and villains to match, leaving less room for compromise and more for didactic stories of good and evil.

The choice of genre is also largely dependent on the subject position of the hero – literary or film comedies very often reach for child protagonists, who recount their childhood or teenage years with disarming naivety or with an ironic eye towards the generation of their parents. This device is not limited just to Czech culture in relation to state socialism, though it has received little attention. An early example is the Yugoslav film *Tito and Me* (*Tito i ja*, dir. Goran Marković, 1992), which builds comic situations around the discrepancy between the child protagonist's guileless admiration for Marshall Tito and his parents' opposition to the regime. Michal Viewegh's novel of the same year, *Bliss Was It in Bohemia* (*Báječná léta pod psa*), discussed in Chapter 2, uses the same mechanism to offer a humorous commentary on the political absurdities of late socialism.<sup>12</sup> Much of the production of the German wave of *Ostalgie* – nostalgia for East Germany – are coming-of-age narratives with comic overtones, such as Jana Hensel's *After the Wall* (*Zonenkinder*, 2002). Another prominent example of a humorous story of growing up in the 1970s is Thomas Brussig's *On the Shorter End of Sun Avenue* (*Am*

*kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee*) and the accompanying film *Sun Alley* (1992). Locating readers' and viewers' sympathies with a child hero leads towards a forgiving view of the past that allows them to laugh away the communist regime's negative aspects. More recently, the Slovak film *The Hostage* (*Rukojemník*, dir. Juraj Nvota, 2014) uses a child protagonist's perspective to turn the regime's repressive apparatus – in this case, its well-guarded border with Austria – into a source of exciting childhood adventure. While much Czech production depicting state socialism is set in such a humorous register, Chapter 6 examines contrasting narratives that employ more 'serious' generic conventions, told from the perspective of an adult hero, who, unlike the cute child or blundering adolescent, challenges the regime, often with tragic consequences.

### From Nostalgia to Retro

When discussing the memory of state socialism in the former Eastern Bloc, it is impossible to avoid the notion of nostalgia, which has captured much scholarly attention.<sup>13</sup> I view the phenomenon as longing for an idealized aspect or aspects of the past, with the acknowledgement, in Pam Cook's words, that 'this idealised something can never be retrieved in actuality'.<sup>14</sup> As such, nostalgia is an emotion relating to the past. However, like other emotions, nostalgia is neither totalizing nor systematic. Nostalgia rarely takes the socialist period as a whole as its object, but rather only specific aspects of it, while easily condemning, or simply not addressing others. For instance, a significant object of nostalgia in the Czech context is resistance against the ruling regime between 1948 and 1989. Representations that make use of this trope do not shy away from the more negative aspects of living in an authoritarian regime – they by no means wish to laud the previous political order but generate a nostalgic investment in one specific aspect of the period. The unpleasant features of life under socialism – indeed, a condemnation of the political system – are necessary to this kind of nostalgia: resistant gestures are defined in contradistinction to the regime's oppression.

In this context, one cannot ignore Svetlana Boym's influential study *The Future of Nostalgia*, with its differentiation between restorative and reflective dimensions of the phenomenon: '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'.<sup>15</sup> In Boym's typology, the former kind of nostalgia lends itself more easily to reactionary nationalist projects, which long for a simple, Manichean conception of good and evil.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, she evaluates the potential of the reflective strand of nostalgia more optimistically,



where ‘longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection’.<sup>17</sup> As for the relationship between the two, Boym suggests that the different types of nostalgia may be triggered by the same symbols, but tell different stories about them. However, this book proposes that the two types of nostalgia are not necessarily as opposed as they may initially seem; the two can intermingle in a single artefact and its reception. As the following chapters demonstrate, a wistful longing for a simpler time when it was easy to know which side is the ‘right side’ and an ironic, distanced appreciation of the aesthetics of the past can comfortably coexist as ‘retro’, which forms a middle point to Boym’s dichotomy.

Retro has received only limited attention in discussions of postsocialist nostalgia.<sup>18</sup> In the literature, cases of stylistic appropriation of artefacts from the socialist past and their refashioning as desirable, quirky, hip or cool in the present are often read as part of such nostalgia. But it seems to me that such a designation suffers a terminological confusion. Mitja Velikonja, in his synthetic study of nostalgic practices across the former Eastern Bloc, distinguishes between first-hand and second-hand nostalgia in a typology similar to Boym’s framework of restorative and reflective nostalgia. Yet in what sense is one of the examples Velikonja gives, ‘the image of Stalin on an alarm clock with the inscription *Stalminator* — “I will be back”’,<sup>19</sup> productively viewed as nostalgia if it does not evince a longing for another era? If there is a rejection of the past at stake, then referring to it as nostalgia is not particularly fitting. Yet it is precisely such a dynamic of refusing the politics of the past while ironically taking pleasure in its aesthetics that constitutes the dominant mode of representing socialism in the Czech context. While some scholars have posited ‘postmodern nostalgia’ as a suitable term for such a relationship to the past devoid of sentimental longing,<sup>20</sup> my aim is to flesh out ‘retro’ as a more fitting concept.

To an extent, nostalgia is an inherent feature of remembering youth, which has led some commentators to perceive it as apolitical. Yet it is precisely a political rejection of the past that allows for its aesthetic appreciation or even gives it an air of provocation, which constitutes a political interpretation in its own right. Figure 0.2 shows a postcard sold in the gift shop of the privately owned Museum of Communism in Prague, illustrating this dynamic. In an unmistakable irony, the Museum’s exhibition was until 2017 placed in rooms in the Savarin Palace in central Prague, which also houses a casino and a McDonald’s outlet. Indeed, the Museum’s marketing strategy was well aware of the paradoxical power of this idiosyncratic location. The postcard displays an image of Lenin, while the text reads: ‘We’re above McDonalds, across from Benetton, viva la imperialism!’ The tongue-in-cheek message is ironic towards both socialism and capitalism, but ridiculing the

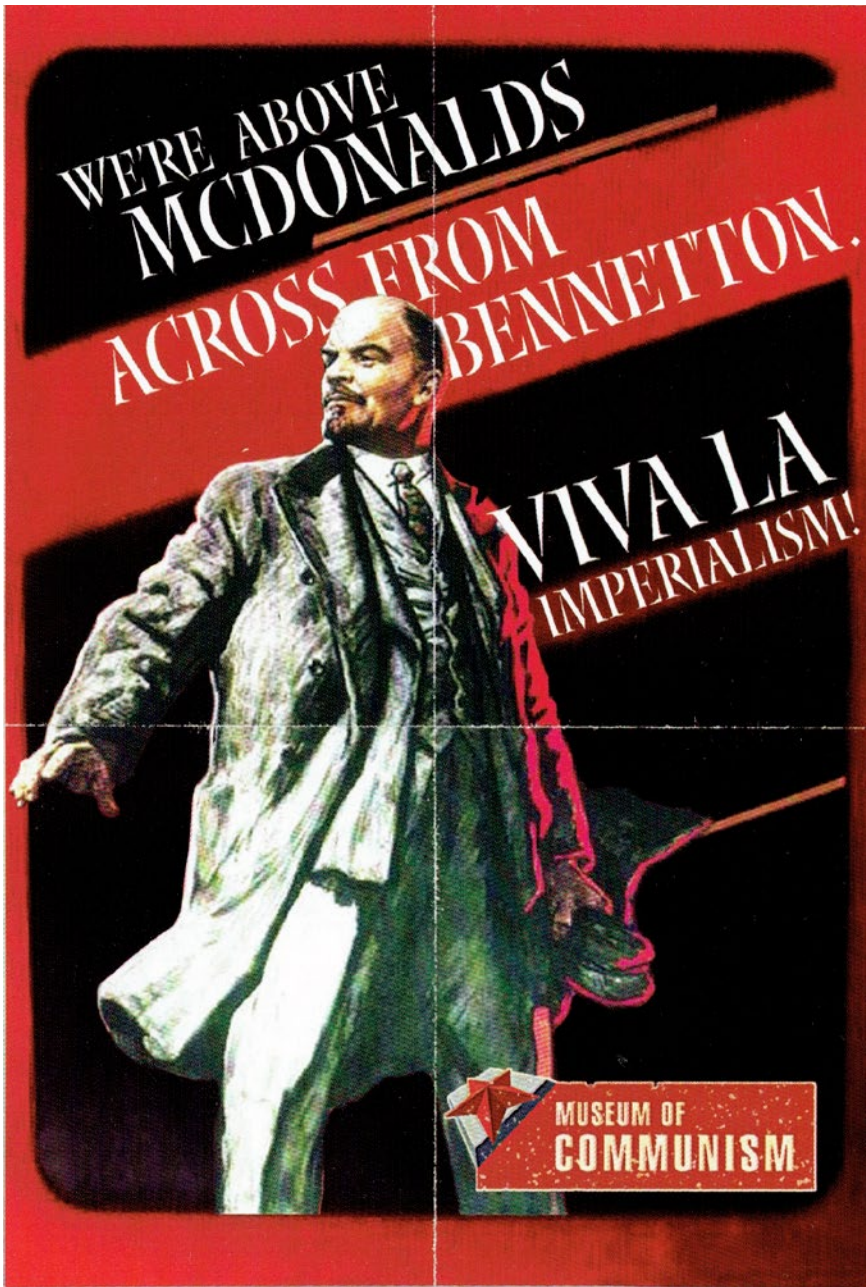


Figure 0.2 Promotional postcard. © Museum of Communism, Prague.

symbols of socialism sells better: Lenin is overshadowed by slogans confirming capitalism's victory over the politics he represents.

Rather than a subset of nostalgia, the phenomenon described here deserves to be considered on its own terms, given how widespread it is across the former Eastern Bloc and beyond. The term 'retro' is used to designate a memory regime devoid of affect or lived memory, a pick-and-mix attitude capitalizing on the stylistic repertoires of the past, which lends it to various irreverent and ironic iterations, while feasting on the colours, sounds and textures of socialism. While bearing some resemblance to Boym's reflective nostalgia, the latter term is inadequate for two reasons: not only is the emotional dimension associated with nostalgia confusing rather than helpful when discussing such detached appropriations of the past, it is also predicated on a different conception of temporality. And it is to the understanding of the temporal relation between socialism and liberal democracy that the production of political meaning is tied. While nostalgia sees aspects of the present moment as inferior to the past it turns to, retro in the Czech case strives for the end point of the events of 1989 that overthrew the communist regime and ushered in the democratic political order. However, this is not a dynamic characteristic only of the Czech context or indeed postsocialism; an aesthetic fascination with the past narrated from a position of affirming the more enlightened politics of the present can be found across 'Western' representational culture as well. The knowledge of the historical outcome grants retro representations a position of superiority, allowing audiences to appropriate – and ridicule – aspects of the past. In this way, 'velvet retro' acknowledges the fact that this memory regime offers just as much of a commentary on the present as on the past it turns to – it is firmly rooted in the era inaugurated by the Velvet Revolution. And velvet is fitting in another sense too. As we will see, much of the Czech cultural memory of socialism sought not to antagonize, but rather to create a gentle image – to hark back to the Slovak name for the revolution of 1989 – of state socialism.

Most protagonists of the representations discussed in this book, through their ignorance or indifference to politics, cannot be seen as nostalgic for the regime they lived in, but rather for their everyday lives. The locus of nostalgia thus lies not in the political and the public, but in the personal, the private and the familial. In such a reading, nostalgia can be seen as an empowering mechanism. Mayer argues in this vein when she notes that a number of Czech comedies about socialism 'project a non-political vision of history, by which they return the past to all those people "without a story" who were neither communist cadres, nor former prisoners, nor dissidents, who did not particularly engage themselves for or against ... and who, after all, constitute the vast – and silent – majority of the population'.<sup>21</sup> In the German context, *Ostalgie* – an amalgam of the German words for nostalgia and east,

designating nostalgia for the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) – has been perceived by many commentators as a reaction to the feeling of East Germans that their experience of living in the GDR has been devalued. Nostalgia is thus seen to have a resistant potential; in the eyes of many scholars working on East Germany, it is understood as a memory regime that contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the period.

However, such an interpretation of nostalgia demands revision. We will see that many Czech cultural reflections of the socialist period also turn to everyday experiences, and although they portray instances of – often comic – negotiation with state power, ultimately they are structured in a way that tends to reinforce a binary framework of oppression and resistance. This discursive tendency frames the socialist period in a way that was prevalent in the historiography of the Cold War, which viewed socialist regimes on an axis of a dictatorial regime versus a victimized population, only occasionally complicated by examples of dissent. The corpus of texts and practices I look at does seek to establish some extent of agency for subjects in state socialism through a widespread thematization of resistant gestures that challenge this dichotomy by finding spaces of negotiation in between. But such gestures also produce a narrative of exculpation: responsibility for the regime is always relegated to someone else and not to the positively valued protagonists and actors of the representations and practices in question. In this sense, Czech cultural depictions of socialism are not at odds with the public discourse on the period, which, dominated by anticommunism, elided questions of the public's role in maintaining the communist regime in power and instead cast citizens as controlled by a totalitarian state. Yet, we will see that this dynamic begins to change with the time elapsed since the demise of the previous regime and the eventual pluralization of both the media and political discourse.

### **The Trouble with the *Ostalgie* Debate**

Much has been written on various forms of longing for the former GDR, known as *Ostalgie*. This memory regime describes a captivation with the aesthetics and material and popular culture of socialism that manifests across the former socialist region in literature, film and television, in the popularity of old brands and various other commercial iterations, including the souvenir industry, with its various more or less ironic Lenin and Stalin mementoes. Its perhaps other best-known version has come to be designated as *Yugonostalgia*, referring to nostalgia for the former Yugoslavia. Here, I on the one hand offer a case study that explores the Czech context, which has been largely under-represented in this burgeoning literature. But, on the other hand, this book

is also concerned with a critical assessment of the nostalgia paradigm, which has become so prominent in the study of the memory of state socialism, as an 'exportable' interpretive framework and recognizes that a more complex typology of cultural reactions to the socialist past is necessary.

Unlike Germany, we will see that in the Czech case, there is little evidence for nostalgia for the utopian impulse behind the socialist project or for the values the Communist Party attempted to instil in citizens. Yet neither has the period necessarily been cast as trauma. Instead, what we witness is more akin to a form of amnesia: the dominant narrative of the postsocialist era, as seen in the media, in the discourse of politicians and in cultural production, dismissed the past in order to divest both the population and political elites from responsibility for perpetuating or condoning the previous regime. Simultaneously, a vision of an anticommunist rejection of socialism was retrospectively validated through recurring tropes of personal opposition or what in German has been referred to as the *Nischengesellschaft* – a society that fled to private interests.<sup>22</sup> The dismissal of course applies first and foremost to the injustices committed in this regime's name, while the previous era's achievements are systematically ignored or rhetorically separated from their political context, labelled as arising 'in spite of' the political configuration. It is thus my contention that the object of remembrance in the Czech context is less the period of socialism itself than a narrative of how Czechs successfully lived through it without 'compromising' themselves politically.

Rather than Germany, it would seem that Slovakia would be the most natural point of comparison with the Czech case, given that the Czechs and Slovaks shared one country between 1948 and 1992 and that the socialist past both nations turn to in their memory is a common Czechoslovak one. Yet cultural iterations of postsocialist nostalgia have been scarce in Slovakia, due to a combination of structural, political and cultural reasons. In this book, I argue that while representations of socialism in the Czech Republic tended to predominantly employ the genre conventions of comedy, creating a seemingly lenient picture of the past, they simultaneously carried an underlying anticommunist message. However, the situation in Slovakia was different, not only due to comedy not having as strong a tradition in the Slovak cultural canon, but also because the discourse of anticommunism gained less traction in Slovakia, where the exchange of elites after 1989 was not as complete as in the country's Czech part and the legacy of reform communism continued to enjoy more legitimacy in the immediate aftermath of regime change.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, film as one of the main mass media of cultural memory did not widely participate in structuring how the socialist past has been remembered in Slovakia, as the country produced only a few feature films in the 1990s, mainly because of the prolonged and unclear privatization of the Koliba film studios in Bratislava and the decimating effect this

had on the Slovak film industry.<sup>24</sup> Struggling with a lack of funding, costly costume dramas depicting the socialist past were not a priority for Slovak filmmakers. Such films only started being produced two decades later, after the Slovak film industry's reinvigoration through the founding of the Slovak Audiovisual Fund. By the time Slovak films depicting life under the former regime such as *The Informer* (*Eštébák*, dir. Juraj Nvota, 2012), *Red Captain* (*Rudý kapitán*, dir. Michal Kollár, 2016) and *The Teacher* (*Učiteľka*, dir. Jan Hřebejk, 2016) entered cinemas, the Czech wave of comedy retro nostalgia discussed in the following chapters had subsided. With the exception of the already-mentioned comedy *The Hostage*, these later films, produced as Czecho-Slovak (and in the case of *Red Captain*, also Polish) coproductions, evinced a new trend in both countries that cast the memory of socialism as trauma. Slovak literature displayed a similar move, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

The German case thus remains instructive as it has produced the largest body of literature, which has led *Ostalgie* to dominate scholarly work on the topic. Certainly, some of the basic features of the *Ostalgie* discourse apply to the Czech case as well. One is the use of humour and irony as mechanisms for portraying the socialist past, something that the Czech setting shares with its German counterpart, but that is less common in other Eastern European countries.<sup>25</sup> Another important aspect is the role of material culture as a memory trigger – which is often tied to humour – and in particular the commercial exploitation of a past devoid of memory, which opens up questions of who sets the agenda of such ventures and who is being represented. Such comparisons can provide productive springboards, while recognizing that each national context has its historical and political specificities that endow nostalgic practices with different meanings, even if they share the same form.

*Ostalgie* experienced several waves of popularity: initially, it manifested in the return of GDR-era products onto the market in the 1990s;<sup>26</sup> in 1999, two popular film comedies, *Sun Alley* (*Sonnenallee*, dir. Leander Haußmann, 1999) and *Heroes Like Us* (*Helden Wie Wir*, dir. Sebastian Peterson, 1999), both adapted from literary works by Thomas Brussig, appeared in cinemas and thus paved the way for the mass success of *Good Bye, Lenin!* (dir. Wolfgang Becker) in 2003. These representations have been accompanied by various commercial iterations of the fascination with the GDR: a number of GDR-themed television variety shows in 2003; 'Trabi Safari' tours in Berlin; specialized 'Ossi' shops; the revival of the *Ampelmännchen* pedestrian crossing sign, etc.<sup>27</sup>

However, the major preoccupation in discussions of nostalgia in East Germany has been questions of identity, whether of a specifically East German variety, which *Ostalgie* is seen as forging, or of a unified national kind, to which some perceive *Ostalgie* as posing an obstacle. This then forms

the principal difference compared to the Czech Republic. Although the Czechs, especially after splitting from Slovakia in 1993, also grappled with issues of identity, the lack of a 'Western Czechoslovakia' did not foster as strong a comparative identity discourse. This is not to say that any kind of evaluative discourse on the past is also not one that affects identity formation in the present; indeed, the various narratives about the past under scrutiny here often do comment on the idea of a Czech national identity. But the locus of the discussion lies elsewhere: not in the question of how uses of the past contribute to a projection of what it means to be Czech, but in how uses of the past help to create an understanding of how and why Czechs found themselves in the democratic and capitalist present.

Narratives of resistance and overcoming of state socialism imply a return to the 'proper course' of Czech history, with its founding myth of democracy located in the interwar Czechoslovak First Republic, which is widely perceived, in Peter Bugge's summary, as 'the time and place where Czechs were at once most themselves and most European'.<sup>28</sup> Significantly, such narratives conspicuously disregard Slovakia. Although the cultural artefacts discussed in the following chapters all ostensibly turn to a Czechoslovak past, its Slovak part remains strikingly absent, apart from a few outlying examples that feature Slovak-speaking characters. Altogether, this bias is representative of a wider trend of overlooking Slovakia in Czech culture and suggests that the imagined 'golden age' of the First Republic is understood by these representations as an achievement of a distinctly *Czech* democratic spirit.<sup>29</sup>

Returning to Germany, two factors created very different conditions for coming to terms with the past in comparison with other countries of the Eastern Bloc: funding from West Germany that enabled high-quality historical research and effective administration of the archives of the secret police (the Stasi), as well as the historical precedent of having to deal with the legacy of Nazism.<sup>30</sup> While the swift pace of the transformation made the GDR exceptional,<sup>31</sup> it also exacerbated feelings of loss: products from the GDR quickly disappeared off the shelves of shops, a fact that is humorously exploited in *Good Bye, Lenin!*, and the former East German territories were flooded with Western popular and consumer culture.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, the phenomenon of the success of relaunched East German consumer goods forms the focus of much of the writing on *Ostalgie*. Whereas in the Czech Republic the fascination with socialist brands has been more modest and couched in a narrative of continuity between socialism and postsocialism, in Germany these products became a site of the articulation of an East German *Trotzidentität*<sup>33</sup> or a kind of identity of defiance against what some perceived as West German cultural and economic hegemony. This has been read by some scholars as an empowering gesture for East Germans. Daphne Berdahl, for instance, interprets *Ostalgie* as 'potentially disruptive

practices that emanate from the margins to challenge certain nation-building agendas of the new Germany',<sup>34</sup> while Jonathan Bach suggests that 'by refusing the self-evidently superior western goods for the "good old" East German products, it is the easterner who is seeking to use the market symbolically against the West'.<sup>35</sup> Such interpretations tend to come more often from English-speaking scholars. But German critics such as Thomas Abbe, albeit in a more cautious manner, have also pointed to the therapeutic potential of reclaiming Eastern products as a form of self-assurance in a public climate where East German experiences were being diminished.<sup>36</sup> Often, though, GDR product fetishization and other nostalgic cultural forms are seen as an obstacle to a unified German identity, which is usually perceived as the ultimate horizon of interpretation of any debate on the socialist past in Germany.<sup>37</sup>

*Ostalgic* films have also been read as empowering: Paul Cooke, for example, offers a very positive reading of *Sun Alley*, a tale of a group of teenagers growing up in East Berlin next to the Berlin Wall, when he argues that the film 'is the attempt to give a voice to the experience of ordinary people who lived in the GDR'.<sup>38</sup> Oana Godeanu-Kenworthy's assessment of *Good Bye, Lenin!* is even more optimistic: 'Wolfgang Becker's film represents a powerful statement on the healing potential of a redemptive view of the GDR past ... that emphasizes precisely those values that are deemed worthy of salvaging from elimination and of integration into the new collective German identity'.<sup>39</sup> However, such interpretations appear overconfident, not least because box-office successes such as the two films in question are hardly an example of East German grassroots self-representation, but products designed within a complex market environment where West German capital plays an important role and the question of who represents whom for what audience is anything but straightforward.

Nevertheless, one observation is worth dwelling on in more detail in order to highlight an important difference between the Czech and German context, namely the idea that *Ostalgic* representations attempt to recover values of the socialist past that are deemed superior to the values of the present, i.e. they turn back to the utopian impulse behind the socialist project. Much has been written about both *Sun Alley* and *Good Bye, Lenin!* in this regard. The latter film in particular is a story in which the main protagonist Alex rebuilds an idealized version of the GDR: 'The GDR that I created for my mother', he reflects in the film, 'became more and more the GDR which I would have perhaps wished for myself'.<sup>40</sup> An even better example of a nostalgic longing for a more just society can be found in the less discussed film *Kleinruppin Forever* (dir. Carsten Fiebler, 2004), which explicitly thematizes a desire for those values of socialism that appear absent in capitalism, such as community bonding, genuine solidarity or social security. Using the somewhat



contrived device of a chance meeting of identical twins separated at birth who then swap places – one lives in West Germany and the other in the East in the 1980s – the film focuses on the Western twin who comes to reject the values of the achievement-oriented and money-grubbing society he grew up in for a world of a common struggle for justice and true love in the GDR.<sup>41</sup> Such an impulse behind the depiction of the socialist past is hard to detect in the Czech context. Czech representations tend to be wary of any grand narratives, as the discussion of depictions of heroism will show; yet implicitly democracy and freedom (understood largely as the freedom of the market) are valued as the default position from which any retrospective evaluations of the past can be carried out. Unlike Germany, where the memory of National Socialism looms large in the pre-GDR past, Czech representations of socialism can implicitly turn to the interwar First Republic as an object of nostalgia, which Czech postsocialist memory has styled as a cradle of democracy.<sup>42</sup>

A line of argument that comes closer to my focus is the identification of East German products as aesthetically ‘camp’, which places *Ostalgic* practices within a framework of cultural recycling that acknowledges the products’ ‘quaintness’ or ‘backwardness’<sup>43</sup> as a selling point. Such a valuation lends itself to irony and humour: Dominic Boyer points out that *Good Bye, Lenin!*, for instance, builds one of its best jokes on the fact that the main protagonist and his friend are able to easily imitate one of the most advanced technological products of the GDR – the main television news programme – with just a few props.<sup>44</sup> Such a positioning depends on who is performing it. As Jonathan Bach observes, *Ostalgie* can be interpreted as a genuine longing for a gone world on the part of East Germans: ‘yet when the subject is the knowingly ironic westerner (or the “sophisticated” easterner) enjoying the retro aura of GDR era design, Ostalgia appears as a (p)ostmodern artifact valued precisely for its lack of emotional attachment to a specific past’.<sup>45</sup> It is such an examination of how facets of the past are either co-opted or discarded to form the ideological fabric of the present that lies at the heart of the analysis in this book.

## Narrating Memory

My examination of representations of socialism is predicated on the basic insight that narrative gives meaning to the past and that it is the form narratives take that contributes to what they tell us. Therefore, thinking about retrospective representations of the past is not a question of ‘how it really was’, but a question of memory. Memory is first and foremost individual remembering and the memories that each individual holds are initially, as Aleida Assmann remarks, fragmentary, unformed and restricted. It is ‘only

through narrativization that they subsequently acquire form and structure'.<sup>46</sup> Such narrated memories, if they are publicly circulated, can become part of a shared discourse about the past. The circulation of these narratives, which are through various processes the subject of either consensus or contestation in the public sphere, is captured in the metaphor of collective memory.<sup>47</sup>

As Andreas Huyssen observes, 'the past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory'.<sup>48</sup> In this way, representation – and, in particular, visual representation – often structures the way in which the past is remembered. If we think about how the past is accessible, especially to a younger generation who did not themselves experience socialism, popular culture (and film and television especially) becomes central to the understanding of this metaphorical collective memory. This book is thus concerned with collective cultural memory as opposed to communicative memory, to use Jan Assmann's distinction: it deals with memory that is transmitted by various institutional and cultural media, rather than the oral transmission of lived experience.<sup>49</sup> Yet what complicates the picture is that in the studied period – the first twenty-five years after 1989 – the memory of the previous regime was very much still part of living, communicative memory of several generations who had experienced it first hand; at the same time, this memory was already being mediated by various means. Such parallel processes in cultural and communicative memory mean that it is difficult to separate the two – lived memories influence mediated representations and these in turn have the power to shape the communicative memory of what audiences 'actually remember'. The phenomenon whereby images are internalized as memories, usually by spectators of visual representations, has been termed 'prosthetic memory' by Alison Landsberg.<sup>50</sup> How the past is remembered is thus constituted in a wider mediascape, which the breadth of sources that this book draws on tries to capture.

At the same time, institutions also attempt to forge collective memory through active interventions in remembrance practices. In the case of the memory of socialism in the Czech Republic, these efforts manifested themselves, for example, in the various transitional justice laws of the early 1990s – such as the restitution of property confiscated by the communist state – which attempted to 'repair history' in the legal sphere. Another example is the setting up of the state-sponsored Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, which is discussed in Chapter 6. But a number of nonstate actors also actively tried to shape memory, such as the activities of the Confederation of Political Prisoners (Konfederace politických vězňů (KPV)), which sought to promote the active remembrance of the injustices committed by the communist regime. Such institutional interventions take the form of 'memory politics', which, as Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard argue, interpret the past for the

purposes of the ‘reformulation of collective identities and the introduction or reinvigoration of the principles of legitimizing power’.<sup>51</sup> Uses of the past thus have an instrumental side to them, in that they are more often than not tied to a project of negotiating not only collective identities, but also the notion of a single national identity.

However, we must keep in mind that representation and memory are not equivalent. The circulation of images of the past contributes to a public discourse on this past, but that is not ground enough to draw conclusions about the memory of the general population. Cultural producers and those who contribute to media debates are necessarily elite groups with sufficient social capital to be able to set the agenda of public discussion; an analysis of public discourse is always limited to this field and cannot be used to extrapolate conclusions about the memory of the population at large.<sup>52</sup> This is not to say that audiences are passive agents in this process. Although I will show that in the Czech case, cultural production and official memory politics do often reaffirm one another, this is not to construct an argument for a ‘culture industry’ that manipulates its consumers.<sup>53</sup> Rather, while we need to take into account that popular culture resources are produced by those who hold hegemonic status and thus ‘carry the interests of the economically and ideologically dominant’,<sup>54</sup> the ability of these resources to generate resistant meanings is equally important. If I argue that representations of socialism are structurally organized in a way that leads to an anticommunist rejection of the past, this is not necessarily the meaning that all consumers will take away, as Chapter 3 will show.

However, it is an acknowledged limitation of the scope of this book that it chooses to focus on fictional images of the past; as such, it looks at cultural memory projects, but is less concerned with how this cultural memory is assimilated in communicative memory amongst the population. To avoid discussing only the reception of the artefacts in question amongst the limited groups of reviewers and journalists, I also take into account reception figures (such as book sales, box office figures and TV ratings) as one of the criteria of popularity on the basis on which examples in this book were chosen.<sup>55</sup> In this sense, I am following Astrid Erll’s conceptualization of ‘media of cultural memory’, which acknowledges that while representations may employ conscious strategies to shape the memory of the past they represent, they also must be received as memory-making media in order to have a real impact on how the past is remembered.<sup>56</sup> Thus, for instance, I do not discuss films with low audience figures and a lack of reviews (or mention them only cursorily), as we can assume they did not widely affect shared ideas about the past either among critics or audiences. For analogous reasons, I have decided to omit documentary films from the discussion, as these also target specialized audiences.

Moreover, how Czech viewers receive representations of the socialist past is a topic that has received scholarly attention, albeit of limited scope. Historian Kamil Činátl offers a persuasive example of how the analysis of internet forums can help to gauge how viewers negotiate resistant meanings in relation to texts such as the Czech Television series *Tell Me a Story*.<sup>57</sup> Irena Reifová, Kateřina Gillarová and Radim Hladík have examined viewers' responses to the same series based on focus groups with audience members.<sup>58</sup> In a further study, Reifová argues that the elite discourses of official memory politics have promoted a memory of discontinuity embodied by radical mnemonic actors (dissidents, political prisoners, party officials) to whom the majority of the population could not relate. She thus reads postsocialist nostalgia as a manifestation of a memory of continuity of 'ordinary people' from below.<sup>59</sup> Such an approach can undoubtedly produce valuable conclusions if close attention to reception experiences is paid; this book is mostly concerned with the textuality of mediations of the socialist past, yet with an effort to avoid the methodological error of extrapolating the wider social uses of particular artefacts from their structure, as Reifová warns.

What is thus at stake in the following chapters is an examination of how memories of the past are harnessed to particular ideological projects. By understanding the processes that construct memory – in whose interest it is to propagate a particular narrative and who it is aimed at – one can begin to unravel the agendas behind different memories, be it, for instance, the legitimation of particular groups in the political arena or the creation of group or national identities. Chapter 1 deals with narratives of anticommunism in both the political and cultural sphere in the 1990s, providing the background necessary to understanding the public relationship to the socialist past and how it has been shaped by memory politics. Chapter 2 maps the cultural landscape of the same decade in relation to portraying socialism and discusses comedy as the principal memory vehicle for representing the past in the immediate aftermath of the demise of state socialism. In Chapter 3, several events that took place around 1999 are taken as a case study for examining the relevance of the concept of nostalgia to the Czech situation. The chapter analyses several controversies around socialist-era popular culture and contrasts the memory of continuity expressed by audiences with the dismissive approach of a cultural elite in the media.

Chapter 4 identifies 'petty heroism' as a central trope in Czech representations of socialism, whereby through the performance of minor gestures of resistance, the mantle of heroism is taken on by 'ordinary' characters, and the population at large is thus seen as collectively taking an exemplary stance of resistance against an authoritarian regime. Chapter 5 then presents the book's main theoretical contribution in elaborating the central concept of retro: it shows that an aesthetic fascination with state socialism is not at odds with

rejecting its ideology and practical implementation. I demonstrate that, ultimately, representations of socialism tell a story in which liberal democracy is seen as a natural culmination of Czech history, a process that is, however, not unique to the Czech Republic or indeed the postsocialist space.

Chapter 6 discusses how in the mid 2000s, the Czech public sphere witnessed a discursive shift on both the institutional and representational level, which brought the memory of oppression and heroic resistance under state socialism to the fore. This ‘fortification’ of heroic memory, I argue, came at a time when the dominant anticommunist discourse of the postsocialist years was increasingly coming under challenge from academic circles and a new generation of media actors. Such a pluralization of both representational culture and public debates has led to the past becoming a site of productive debate and contestation in some cases. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the book’s main arguments and offers some thoughts on their wider applicability.

## Notes

1. Throughout this book, the terminology used to refer to the period between 1948 and 1989 in Czechoslovakia distinguishes between the ideological project of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (communism, the communist regime and Communist Party rule) and its practical, day-to-day implementation (state socialism).
2. ‘Totalitarianism’ not only as a discursive category but also as an analytical concept in historiography saw renewed interest in East-Central Europe after the collapse of state socialism (while discussions of this category had been ongoing already prior to that on the other side of the Iron Curtain); see B. Hoenig, ‘Možnosti a meze jednoho paradigmatu: Teorie totalitarismu aplikovaná na státní socialismus středovýchodní Evropy’, *Soudobé dějiny* 16(4) (2009), 640–52. Key works of the theory of totalitarianism were translated into Czech in the 1990s, e.g. Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* (published by OIKOYMENH in 1996). However, in the Czech context, the analytical concept is often confused with ‘totalita’, the more common Czech designation for totalitarianism, which functions as a political and moral shorthand for the communist regime.
3. H. Válková, bse, ‘Hodnocení oslav: nadšení z Listopadu trvá, Zeman si za pískot mohl sám’ [‘Enthusiasm for November (1989) Prevails, the Whistling was Zeman’s Own Fault’], *iDnes.cz*, 18 November 2014. Retrieved 15 August 2019 from [http://zpravy.idnes.cz/anketa-vyroci-listopad-ohlednuti-dlc-/domaci.aspx?c=A141118\\_094055\\_domaci\\_hv](http://zpravy.idnes.cz/anketa-vyroci-listopad-ohlednuti-dlc-/domaci.aspx?c=A141118_094055_domaci_hv).
4. *iDnes.cz*, ČTK, ‘Policejní blokáda Albertova zneuctila 17. listopad, miní děkan i studenti’ [‘Police Blockade of Albertov Defiled 17 November, Says Dean and Students’], *iDnes.cz*, 18 November 2015. Retrieved 15 August 2019 from [http://zpravy.idnes.cz/dekan-studenti-i-ucitele-ztratili-letos-na-albertove-svobodu-ptn-/domaci.aspx?c=A151118\\_152653\\_domaci\\_zt](http://zpravy.idnes.cz/dekan-studenti-i-ucitele-ztratili-letos-na-albertove-svobodu-ptn-/domaci.aspx?c=A151118_152653_domaci_zt).

5. For more on Babiš's biography, see T. Pergler, *Babiš: Příběh oligarchy* (Prague: Mladá fronta, 2014).
6. See, for instance, A. Wirsching, *Der Preis der Freiheit: Geschichte Europas in unserer Zeit* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2012); M. Kopeček and P. Wciślik (eds), *Thinking through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe after 1989* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2015); P. Ther, *Europe since 1989: A History*, trans. Charlotte Hughes-Kreutzmüller (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); A. Gjuríčová et al. (eds), *Rozdělení minulostí: Vytváření politických identit v České republice po roce 1989* (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny, 2012); M. Kopeček and A. Gjuríčová (eds), *Kapitoly z dějin české demokracie po roce 1989* (Prague and Litomyšl: Paseka, 2008); L. Kopeček, *Éra nevinnosti: Česká politika 1989–1997* (Brno: Barrister and Principal, 2010); A. Gjuríčová and T. Zahradníček, *Návrat parlamentu: Češi a Slováci ve Federálním shromáždění 1989–1992* (Prague: Argo, 2018).
7. Appraisals of cultural responses to the socialist past remain partial in the Czech Republic and have mainly been conducted through the prism of nostalgia. For example, Martin Franc has studied the popularity of socialist-era brands, Andrew Roberts has addressed re-emergent socialist popular culture and Irena Reifová is concerned with nostalgia in television production. A growing literature analyses cinematic portrayals of the past, in particular the work of Kamil Činátl, Radim Hladík and the edited collection *Film a dějiny 4: Normalizace*. See M. Franc, 'Ostalgie v Čechách', in M. Kopeček and A. Gjuríčová (eds), *Kapitoly z dějin české demokracie po roce 1989* (Prague and Litomyšl: Paseka, 2008), 193–216; M. Franc, 'Ostalgie v České republice a v SRN', in D. Kunštát and L. Mrklas (eds), *Historická reflexe minulosti aneb 'Ostalgie' v Německu a Česku* (Prague: CEVRO Institut, 2009), 7–14; A. Roberts, 'The Politics and Anti-politics of Nostalgia', *East European Politics and Societies* 16(3) (2002), 764–809; I. Reifová, 'Kryty moci a úkryty před mocí: Normalizační a postkomunistický televizní seriál', in J. Končelík, B. Köpplová and I. Prázová (eds), *Konsolidace vládnutí a podnikání v České Republice a v Evropské unii II. Sociologie, prognostika a správa. Média* (Prague: Matfyz Press, 2002), 354–71; I. Carpentier Reifová, K. Gillarová and R. Hladík, 'The Way We Applauded: How Popular Culture Stimulates Collective Memory of the Socialist Past in Czechoslovakia: The Case of the Television Serial *Výprávěj* and its Viewers', in A. Imre, T. Havens and K. Lustyik (eds), *Popular Television in Eastern Europe during and since Socialism* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 199–221; K. Činátl, *Naše české minulosti* (Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2014); R. Hladík, 'Traumatické komedie: Politika paměti v českém filmu', *Sociální studia* 1 (2010), 9–26; P. Kopal (ed.), *Film a dějiny 4: Normalizace* (Prague: Casablanca and ÚSTR, 2014).
8. F. Mayer, *Les Tchèques et leur communisme: Mémoire et identités politiques* (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2004).
9. The fear of 'returning to the times before 1989' is a very common rhetorical trope, omnipresent in everyday speech and in the media, as Susanna Trnka summarizes in her ethnographic study 'Forgotten Pasts and Fearful Futures in Czechs' Remembrances of Communism', *Focaal – Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 66 (2013), 36–46. The trope often emerges in reaction to steps that are perceived by the speaker as undemocratic or to rhetoric that is seen to be reminiscent of the language of the state socialist era. On the economic level, Ilona Švihlíková remarked in 2015 that the 'argument of "returning before November [1989]" is ... used even nowadays against all those who have other than neoliberal ideas about economic policy'; I. Švihlíková, *Jak jsme se stali kolonií* (Prague: Rybka Publishers, 2015), 62.

10. J. Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989–1992* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).
11. H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).
12. Where possible, I have quoted published translations of books and official English distribution titles of films. All other translations are my own.
13. Several edited volumes have now been devoted either entirely or partially to nostalgia across a range of countries of the former Eastern Bloc. See M. Todorova and Z. Gille (eds), *Post-communist Nostalgia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010); M. Todorova (ed.), *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2010); A. Dimou, M. Todorova and S. Troebst (eds), *Remembering Communism: Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014); O. Angé and D. Berliner (eds), *Anthropology and Nostalgia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).
14. P. Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 4.
15. S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xviii.
16. *Ibid.*, 43.
17. *Ibid.*, 48–50.
18. Retro as a cultural phenomenon (rather than marketing and advertising mechanism) has mainly been discussed in the post-Soviet context. See, for instance, N. Ivanova, 'No(w)stalgia: Retro on the (Post)-Soviet Television Screen', *The Harriman Review* 12(2–3) (1999), 25–32; K.M.F. Platt, 'Russian Empire of Pop: Postsocialist Nostalgia and Soviet Retro at the "New Wave" Competition', *The Russian Review* 72(3) (2013), 447–69; E. Kalinina, *Mediated Post-Soviet Nostalgia* (Huddinge: Södertörn University, 2014).
19. M. Velikonja, 'Lost in Transition: Nostalgia for Socialism in Postsocialist Countries', *East European Politics and Societies* 23(4) (2009), 535–51 (538).
20. The label goes back to Fredric Jameson and has been taken up, for example, by Paul Grainge in *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Style in Retro America* (Westport: Praeger, 2002). See also F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).
21. Mayer, *Les Tchèques et leur communisme*, 266.
22. The term *Nischengesellschaft* was coined by Günther Gaus in *Wo Deutschland liegt – Eine Ortsbestimmung* (Hamburg: Hoffmann and Campe, 1983); for a more critical discussion of the term's utility, see M. Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR, 1949–1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), especially 129–50.
23. For a comparison of Czech and Slovak elites after 1989 and their discourses, see G. Eyal, *The Origins of Postcommunist Elites: From Prague Spring to the Breakup of Czechoslovakia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
24. For more on Slovak film in the early 1990s, see V. Macek and J. Paštéková, *Dejiny slovenskej kinematografie* (Martin: Osveta, 1997), 487–522.
25. For instance, in Bulgaria, Vania Stoianova notes that comedy is an extremely rare genre in films about state socialism. See V. Stoianova, 'The Communist Period in Postcommunist Bulgarian Cinema', in Todorova and Gille (eds), *Post-communist Nostalgia*, 373–90 (388). Likewise, neighbouring Poland has only seldom experienced comedy as the genre of choice for portraying the period; rather, the dominant trope in various cultural mediations of the socialist past is that of 'absurdity'. See Z. Grębecka, 'Między śmiechem a nostalgią – powroty do komunistycznej przeszłości', in M. Bogusławska and Z. Grębecka

- (eds), *Popkomunizmus: Doświadczenie komunizmu a kultura popularna* (Cracow: Libron, 2010), 321–43.
26. See D. Berdahl, ‘“(N)Ostalgie” for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things’, *Ethnos* 64(2) (1999), 192–211; M. Blum, ‘Remaking the East German Past: Ostalgie, Identity, and Material Culture’, *Journal of Popular Culture* 24(3) (2000), 229–53.
  27. For a comprehensive overview of the *Ostalgie* phenomenon, see P. Cooke, *Representing East Germany since Unification: From Colonization to Nostalgia* (New York: Berg, 2005).
  28. P. Bugge, ‘Longing or Belonging? Czech Perceptions of Europe in the Inter-War Years and Today’, *Yearbook of European Studies* 11 (1999), 111–29.
  29. Czech historiography evinces a similar problem, tending to overlook Slovakia. More sustained attention is only beginning to be paid to the intellectual history of the idea of Czechoslovakism and a shared past. See A. Hudek, M. Kopeček and J. Mervart (eds), *Čechoslovakismus* (Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2019).
  30. Cooke, *Representing East Germany*, 27.
  31. K. Neller, *DDR-Nostalgie: Dimensionen der Orientierungen der Ostdeutschen gegenüber der ehemaligen DDR, ihre Ursachen und politischen Konnotationen* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006), 21.
  32. For more on consumption practices in relation to GDR products, see Berdahl, ‘“(N)Ostalgie” for the Present’, 192–211.
  33. Neller, *DDR-Nostalgie*, 48.
  34. Berdahl, ‘“(N)Ostalgie” for the Present’, 193.
  35. J. Bach, ‘“The Taste Remains”’: Consumption, (N)ostalgia, and the Production of East Germany’, *Public Culture* 14(3) (2002), 545–56 (549).
  36. T. Abbe, *Ostalgie: Zum Umgang mit der DDR-Vergangenheit in den 1990er Jahren* (Erfurt: Landeszentrale für Politische Bildung 2005), 44.
  37. See T. Goll, ‘Einführung – Erinnerungskultur und Ostalgie’, in T. Goll and T. Leuerer (eds), *Ostalgie als Erinnerungskultur? Symposium zu Leid und Politik in der DDR* (Baden Baden: Nomos, 2004), 9–15; see also Neller, *DDR-Nostalgie*, whose book focuses on the idea that positive relationships towards the GDR might constitute obstacles to the ‘inner unity’ of Germany (especially 26).
  38. P. Cooke, ‘Performing “Ostalgie”: Leander Haussmann’s *Sonnenallee*’, *German Life and Letters* 56(2) (2003), 156–67 (160).
  39. O. Godeanu-Kenworthy, ‘Deconstructing Ostalgia: The National Past between Commodity and Simulacrum in Wolfgang Becker’s *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003)’, *Journal of European Studies* 41(2) (2011), 161–77 (174).
  40. ‘Die DDR, die ich für meine Mutter schuf wurde immer mehr die DDR, die ich mir vielleicht gewünscht hätte.’ *Good Bye, Lenin!*, 2003.
  41. For more on *Kleinruppin Forever*, see A. Enns, ‘The Politics of Ostalgie: Postsocialist Nostalgia in Recent German Film’, *Screen* 48(4) (2007), 475–91.
  42. In his analysis of the press of the 1990s, Stanislav Holubec notes that the First Republic was often posited as a model for democracy building in the post-1989 era and that in this journalistic approach, Czechs were seen as ‘reliving’ their history after the collapse of state socialism. See S. Holubec, *Ještě nejsme za vodou: Obrazy druhých a historická paměť v období postkomunistické transformace* (Prague: Scriptorium, 2015), 102.
  43. Berdahl, ‘“(N)Ostalgie” for the Present’, 194.
  44. D. Boyer, ‘Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany’, *Public Culture* 18(2) (2006), 361–81 (376).
  45. Bach, ‘“The Taste Remains”’, 546–47.



46. A. Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006), 25.
47. Since the 1980s, the disciplines of history and broadly conceived cultural studies have been experiencing a 'memory boom'. Among the most prominent contributions are M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); P. Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations* 26 (1989), 7–24; A. Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006); J. Assmann, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', trans. John Czaplicka, *New German Critique* 65 (1995), 125–33; M. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). The state of the field is summarized in A. Erl and A. Nünning (eds), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008).
48. A. Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2–3. The memory boom has given rise to a number of recent interdisciplinary edited volumes concerning twentieth-century European memory, and Eastern Europe in particular. See e.g. J. Niznik (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Wars in European Memory* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013); U. Blacker, A. Etkind, and J. Fedor (eds), *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); M. Pakier and J. Wawrzyniak (eds), *Memory and Change in Europe: Eastern Perspectives* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).
49. J. Assmann, 'Communicative and Cultural Memory', in A. Erl and A. Nünning (eds), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 109–18.
50. A. Landsberg, 'Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an Age of Mass Culture', in P. Grainge (ed.), *Memory and Popular Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 144–61.
51. M. Bernhard and J. Kubik, 'A Theory of the Politics of Memory', in M. Bernhard and J. Kubik (eds), *Twenty Years after Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7–30 (8).
52. In his doctoral research, Vincent Post demonstrated that while attitudes towards the socialist past continue to sway the media and political discussion, they do not constitute an equally salient topic for the electorate: 'The preponderance of what we know about Czechs' views regarding the communist past shows that Czech voters are mostly ambivalent about the communist past and do not share the wholesale rejection that characterizes anticommunism.' See V. Post, 'Putting out the Fire, or Fanning the Flames? How Regulating Secret Service Files and Personnel Affects Contestation over the Communist Past' (PhD thesis, Department of Political Science, McGill University, 2015), 104.
53. For more on the culture industry, see T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming (London: Verso, 1997).
54. J. Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2.
55. To determine a work's impact, I looked at reception networks, constituted by a combination of factors. These include the number of press reviews; where relevant, the number and liveliness of internet discussions dedicated to the work in question; print-runs in the case of literature; awards and prizes; ratings in the case of television shows; box-office statistics in the case of films, as well as DVD releases (including 'cheap DVD' releases, i.e. the rerelease of a film on DVD usually sold with tabloid newspapers and magazines for a price significantly lower than the original DVD). All data on box-office ticket sales, unless otherwise stated, is taken from the Czech Union of Film Distributors, which

- publishes annual box office rankings on its website ([www.ufd.cz](http://www.ufd.cz)). DVD release data is available from the Czech and Slovak Film Database ([www.csfd.cz](http://www.csfd.cz)). Where relevant, works that only gained a small audience and scant reviews are mentioned to illustrate how certain visions or interpretations of the past did not gain traction.
56. A. Erll, 'Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory', in A. Erll and A. Nünning (eds), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 389–98 (395).
  57. An analysis of reception through the internet is of course only possible with the caveat that those who choose to participate in internet debates are a specific group and not representative of reception trends as a whole. See Činátl, *Naše české minulosti*, in particular 127–76.
  58. Reifová, Gillarová and Hladík, 'The Way We Applauded', 199–221.
  59. I. Reifová, 'The Pleasure of Continuity: Re-reading Postsocialist Nostalgia', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 21(6) (2018), 587–602.