

THE ART OF CZECH ANIMATION

A History of
Political Dissent
and Allegory

ADAM
WHYBRAY

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*This book is dedicated to my family, partner,
friends and all the other non-human actants that
have made and continue to make
this work possible.*

Thank you sincerely.

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Prologue

The self-immolation of Jan Palach

16 January 1969, Jan Palach, in protest against the Warsaw Pact invasion and hoping to reverse the stifling despondency taking hold of his country's citizens, set himself alight in Red Army Square (Náměstí Krasnoarmějců). Self-immolation is a form of protest that dramatically bridges the personal and the political as witnesses are confronted by an abstract political statement communicated through real embodied suffering. The violent tangibility of the means of communication chosen by the self-immolating protester forces attention to the everyday material relations obscured beneath political rhetoric and ideology. It is as though the burning body screams to the oppressors, government or demagogue at whom the protest is aimed, 'This – *This* is the impact of your violence.' For Palach and the other men¹ who chose to follow in his wake, the Warsaw Pact invasion was not a matter of abstract political policy but a matter of *matter* – of tanks, soldiers and corpses.

Palach's corpse was buried in Olšany Cemetery. Hundreds of Czechs and Slovaks came to the site to lay flowers and candles.² The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Komunistická strana Československa) (KSČ), wary a figure of anti-state protest was being martyred, sought means to prevent further political pilgrimage. In July 1973 the grave's headstone was removed and, in October, Palach's parents were coerced by State Security (Státní bezpečnost) (StB) to have their son's remains exhumed and cremated. A new headstone was erected by the grave bearing the name Marie Jedličková.³

In an essay collected in a retrospective of Václav Havel's work, Timothy Garton Ash notes the StB's manoeuvre did not halt the visits from those who

wished to mourn or pay tribute to the young man's sacrifice.⁴ The erasing, by a state-sanctioned body, of a signifier that marked the single, official commemorative site for Palach failed to overwrite the meaning that had already accumulated there for those who had encoded the location as a site of tribute to dissent.

Palach's self-immolation and his gravesite's continued potency in spite of the absence of both body and gravestone illustrate the complex dynamics at work when objects, beings and places are invested with political meaning. Was Palach's political message contained within his act of self-immolation? Was it then transferred to his gravesite in the absence of his corpse? Can the political and emotional ideas and feelings encoded in matter continue in spite of this matter's eradication or displacement? How are political ideas materially embodied and what happens when the objects of this embodiment are transformed?

Introduction

Political encoding of objects and things

This book is concerned with acts of political encoding similar to those performed upon Jan Palach and his grave. It examines a host of politically resistant objects and dissident things taken from Czech animations (and live-action films with animation) released between 1946 and 2018.

While looking at Czech animation in all its forms, this book gives particular focus to stop-motion. This is due to a significant ontological distinction between objects in stop-motion films and objects represented by other forms of animation, such as computer-generated imagery (CGI). As with live-action cinema, objects that appear in stop-motion have a continued existence in reality outside their specific film world(s). If we consider the footage of Jan Palach's gravestone, it is subject to projection, mediation and the viewer's gaze, but the gravestone nonetheless remains a real object, situated before the camera, with an independent life transcending the limits of the cinematic frame.

To provide a less politically charged example, imagine a stop-motion director decides to animate a traditional Czech bread roll (*rohlík*). The roll has specific culinary, domestic and cultural connotations for Czech and Slovak viewers, is baked in a specific bakery, bought for a specific price and might be eaten (or thrown away) after filming. Comparatively, the drawing or CGI rendering of a roll is not possessed of the same historical nor material weight. The cultural connotations might remain, but these are liable to change depending on the appearance the object is given – the roll as drawn by Jiří Trnka would have different connotations to the same roll drawn by Hayao Miyazaki. While Jan Švankmajer might animate a roll slightly differently to Hermína Týrlová, at a material level the object remains the same.

Objective definition

This book's definition of 'object' is commonsensical. An object is any individually definable thing with a tangible existence in material reality. Man-made artefacts like knives, mugs or puppets are objects, as are those individual things like stones or tomatoes, which occur in nature.

Puppets are ontologically interesting things since they confuse a strict object/subject dichotomy. They are objects in the material sense but when on stage (or screen) perform as subjects. While watching puppets perform, we – the human audience – are aware of their object status while simultaneously able to invest in their performance of selfhood. A puppet can be the protagonist of a theatrical show even while it remains obvious its agency is not self-determined.

Many film-makers considered in this book also treat objects not intended for use as puppets as their films' principal subjects. In the work of Surrealist animator Jan Švankmajer, the natural and man-made objects on screen often seem to hold a greater degree of subjectivity than the human actors who appear alongside them. Dan Torre reflects that in stop-motion animation the audience occupies the paradoxical position of suspending disbelief that the animated objects are alive, while simultaneously recognizing them as inanimate material forms.¹ In addition to puppets as traditionally understood, *The Art of Czech Animation* stages encounters with rolling pins, toy balls, a clockwork hen, an architect's drawing tools and a wooden stump that resembles a baby, alongside a rich assembly of performing things.

A distinction between objects and things

Up to this point of writing, the word 'thing' has been used interchangeably with 'object', albeit with a sense that 'thing' is a broader and more ambiguous term. Literary theorist Bill Brown has considered the difference between objects and things, asserting that the same item can be understood as both or either an object or a thing, as follows:

The mug before me at the moment of writing is an object. It is white and made of china. The 'apperceptive constitution' of the mug 'is what we might call its objecthood.'² Now imagine the mug not as an object but as a *thing*. Forget,

if you will, the role we have assigned it as a carrier of liquids. Forget, if you are able, its name of 'mug'. Think instead of the dull ringing sound it makes when struck unexpectedly; of its cool, smooth texture in the hand. The 'experience of the thing' is 'what we might call its thinghood'.³ A thing is behaving as an object when it is conceptually categorized according to human schemata, dependent upon its human-given function. We can name the mug, know it is designed to carry liquids and lift it up to our mouth to drink, sure of its stable function. Brown writes elsewhere that 'we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us ... The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject'.⁴ We drop the mug and it smashes into pieces. Suddenly, it looks less like a mug and more like a half-shattered hollow of china that we do not know whether to repair or to consign to the trash. We are less able to categorize the thing than the object since the thing seems to exist independently upon its own terms. Brown's roots in Martin Heidegger's philosophy are apparent in such a distinction. In Heidegger's terminology the broken mug should be considered 'unhandy'⁵ since its 'being-in-itself'⁶ now obscures its use value within a system of human and non-human relations, previously so taken for granted as to be invisible. This is the difference between using a computer when it works as intended, interfacing via the mouse and keyboard without attending to the materiality of either object, and smashing the keyboard down upon the desk and hammering the mouse button when the cursor freezes upon the screen. To quote Heidegger: 'In its conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinacy, what is at hand loses its character of handiness.'⁷

Of course, this tricky distinction between objects and things is somewhat subjective and provisional, and my own usage differs from the distinctions made by other writers, directors and theorists who have also sought to study objects/things, as must be borne in mind when such figures are quoted.

This book's central argument is that certain Czech animations express their political ideas through objects/things (and, by extension, the temporal-spatial relations between these objects/things) rather than through dialogue, voice-over or even – in many cases – conventional narrative. *Which* objects/things are politically encoded, *what* messages they are encoded with and *how* they are encoded are questions investigated here across a selection of films

produced from the end of the Second World War to the present by a number of Czech animators, including Jiří Trnka, Jan Švankmajer and Jiří Barta. This investigation works – it is hoped – towards a new method of film analysis that upholds the material underpinnings of cinematic space.

Methodologies

Across each chapter of this book a different methodological approach assists in exposing the latent political messages within each film (or, rather, within the films' objects/things, the interrelations between them and the times and spaces surrounding them). Chapter 1 uses several ideas from *thing theory*, as developed by its leading practitioner Bill Brown. Chapter 2, concerned with the short films of Jan Švankmajer, parallels the political ideas implicit in Švankmajer's work with ideas expressed by Bruno Latour that form the foundations for his *actor-network-theory*. In Chapter 3 analysis of films by Jiří Barta is illuminated by post-Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre's writings on *rhythmanalysis*, which are used to examine the rhythms of time and space as established through film editing. Chapter 4 employs a culmination of ideas from thing theory, ANT and rhythmanalysis to consider Prague as an ever-changing thing in itself, but also as a series of objects and actors, all interrelated in time and space.

Thing theory

Thing theory is a critical approach pioneered by the academic Bill Brown which concerns itself with the study of objects and things. Thus far thing theory has largely been confined to literary studies, but it also has some overlap with museum studies, archaeology and sociology. Thing theory asserts that there is an ontological distinction between objects and things.⁸ In Brown's monograph *A Sense of Things* (2003) – one of thing theory's foundational texts – the objects in works by four American Victorian novelists (Mark Twain, Frank Norris, Sarah Orne Jewett and Henry James) are traced across a trajectory of encroaching modernism in which objects are increasingly fetishized – not just as commodities, à la Marx, but for their seductive and sometimes

elusive *thingness*. While Brown focuses upon the American Victorian novel, Elaine Freedgood performs similar work for British Victorian texts in *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (2006), attending to the material circumstances in which certain objects mentioned in books of the period were produced, as well as the trade economies in which they circulated.

Brown and Freedgood are concerned as much with anthropology as they are with literature and both ultimately provide a meta-commentary upon the concept that it is things that make us human, an argument taken up more straightforwardly by Daniel Miller in *The Comfort of Things* (2008). However, while Miller concerns himself with an account of the real everyday bric-a-brac within the homes of an anonymous East End London street, Brown and Freedgood might be not unfairly accused of an ontological blurring that confuses the textual thing which exists as a word-concept imaginatively given life by the reader, with those artefacts that physically exist within reality.

One of thing theory's central tenets is that current critical theory displaces objects into symbolic abstractions without first comprehending their materiality. In contrast to previous theoretical approaches, such as those informed by psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, which insist upon privileging the subject and the mediating power of the gaze, a thing theorist approach to film aims to put objects centre stage, not merely as conduits for the desires of the film viewer but as embodied presences defiant and resistant in their 'objecthood' in and of themselves. Indeed, at its core, thing theory simply bids us as readers and viewers to give a greater degree of attentiveness towards objects in literature or film, recognizing that the function of these objects isn't always to facilitate a plot or character development, or merely to 'stand in' for some higher symbolic meaning, but may hold an independent significance with meaning/s rooted in their specific materiality. The rhetoric of 'the life within things' commonly engaged in by thing theorists is given animistic, tactile immediacy through the cinematic medium of stop-motion animation.

In contrast to many of the fictional examples provided by literary thing theorists, the objects of stop-motion animation do not merely exist within the mind of an author or reader. It is the fact that the objects in the films of Jiří

Trnka examined in Chapter 1 have an independent ‘real’ existence outside of the films in which they appear, which ensures the applicability of thing theory to this chapter. Claims about the texture or weight of objects on screen are less hypothetical than similar claims made about objects that have never existed in ‘real life’. Trnka’s stop-motion works almost never involve human actors. The objects and puppets of his films are the subjects. Thing theory ensures that the focus remains upon these subjects.

Actor-network-theory

Rather than being a school or a critical framework, actor-network-theory (ANT) is more simply an approach to any given object of study that refutes the existence of external paradigms to explain a priori the material being studied. Underlying ANT and the writings of its foremost theorist Bruno Latour is the belief that there exists no given ‘field’ in which events unfold, such as ‘nature’, ‘society’ or a ‘laboratory’. All of these are understood to be social constructs and thus never ideologically neutral. Rather, events display the workings of hugely complex networks composed of actors (called ‘actants’ in Latour’s parlance). Conscious intent does not determine the importance or influence of any one actant. Even an actant as seemingly insignificant as a petal or a grain of rice can radically alter a network or shape an event. Jan Švankmajer’s short films, in which objects and things are given the narrative weight generally afforded to human actors, provide a cinematic embodiment of this idea.

Latour’s most committed introduction to ANT is *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (2007), although sections of both *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (2004) and *Pandora’s Hope: An Essay on the Reality of Science Studies* (1999) work through ideas that later find more concrete expression in ANT. Graham Harman’s *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (2009) provides a lucid and comprehensive introduction to both Latour and ANT, situating the philosopher’s work within a scholarly context, giving particular weight to the influence of Heidegger upon his unique metaphysics.

To write as a thing theorist, one must simply turn one’s attentions to objects/things, gathering and interrogating the material, cultural and

historical information that one can, while also paying mind to the ontological and epistemological status that objects/things have been afforded in film and everyday life. This is a rigorous task but nonetheless within reach of any patient writer-thinker with recourse to a library, database and/or archive. By contrast, to write *as* an actor-network-theorist (in comparison to merely writing *about* actor-network-theory) one must accomplish a great deal of ground work observing material processes *as and when they happen*. This is why – for instance – Anita Lam gained entry to a writer’s workshop for her 2013 monograph *Making Crime Television*.

Lam’s text was written in response to what she refers to as the ‘black-boxing’⁹ of television crime drama. Lam argues that academic writers who analyse fictional portrayals of crime tend to focus upon the content of the media as though the shows discussed were always already finished. In contrast to this tendency, her work gives space to the processes by which crime dramas are produced, considering the programmes she selects as case studies in medias res as unstable, mutable and composed from myriad networked actants (computer processors, multiple script re-writes, researchers, newspaper columns, etc.) that are fundamentally irreducible. To develop this argument Lam gained access to the writers’ room of Canadian television drama *The Bridge* (CBS, 2010). Inevitably, however, this approach cannot be replicated for those writing upon series or films completed prior to the point of writing.

As such, Chapter 2 necessarily differs from Chapter 1, which performs a thing theorist reading of a selection of Trnka’s works, and Chapter 3, which performs rhythmanalysis upon works by Jiří Barta. In Chapter 2, Švankmajer’s films are considered in terms of actors and networks, with a view to illuminating the belief system expressed by these films through considering some of the metaphysical assumptions of ANT. This chapter therefore considers Švankmajer *as* an actor-network-theorist, rather than *being* an example of actor-network-theory in itself. This might be argued to be less critically rigorous than the applied methodologies of Chapters 1 and 3, but has the significant advantage of allowing broader claims to be made *about* Švankmajer as a film-maker, rather than ‘simply’ providing exegeses of individual films.¹⁰

Rhythmanalysis

Rhythmanalysis is a mode of poetic-scientific investigation developed by the post-Marxist sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre. For Lefebvre, it is not enough for an ideological analysis to merely consider the political meaning of things and objects in space and time, but space and time *themselves* must also be interrogated. One of Lefebvre's central arguments in *The Production of Space* (*La Production de l'espace*, 1974) is that our built environments are not simply blank, neutral spaces filled with political actors, but are politically and ideologically constructed. Certain spaces allow and, indeed, encourage certain types of political action. For Lefebvre, it would be no coincidence that Prague's Wenceslas Square (Václavské náměstí) (formerly Red Army Square) has been the historical site of so much revolutionary action – the self-immolation of Jan Palach and, later, several demonstrations of the Velvet Revolution. Rather, this will have been determined, in part, by the material construction of the square itself. Furthermore, time can be ideologically encoded, as in the example of the clock face, which spatializes time and, in doing so, estranges it from the rhythms of nature.

In Lefebvre's posthumous publication *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (*Éléments de rythmanalyse*, 1992), rhythmanalysis is proposed as a method for analysing the ideology encoded in the spaces and times of everyday life – a method that involves interrogating the rhythms of a given city or place. The practitioner of this work (or *rhythmanalyst*) must be able to internalize these rhythms on a bodily level, while simultaneously distancing himself/herself from the external action of these rhythms, observing them from afar like a detached sociologist. As such, the rhythmanalyst combines the rigorous objectivity of the scientist with the ecstatic subjectivity of the poet.

Immediately it should be apparent that rhythmanalysis can be applied to the study of film, since film is a temporal-spatial medium, structured according to the rhythms of editing. Film, like music, is composed of a symphony of rhythms. However, despite the clear affinities between the methodology and the medium, there is a limited amount of film studies academia that employs Lefebvre's ideas. Aga Skrodzka uses some quotations from *The*

Production of Space in Magic Realist Cinema in East Central Europe (2012) to illuminate the distinction between the city and nature in Piotr Trzaskalski's *Edi* (2002).¹¹ Mattias Frey (2006) compares Lefebvre's 'synthetic' approach to 'material culture' to that of German film-maker Oskar Roehler in a paper for *Cinema Journal*.¹² Indeed, the only paper as of 2019 that is wholly committed to applying rhythm analysis to film is Eitan Freedenberg's currently unpublished paper 'One-Minute Boogie Woogie: Rhythm analysis and Landscape Cinema' (2013), which unpicks the rhythms of the films of James Benning to illuminate the workings of capital within the American (often Californian) landscapes he depicts.¹³

Rhythm analysis is ideally suited for analysing the political meaning of space and time in the filmography of the animator Jiří Barta, since his films constantly interrogate the notion that space and time are non-political. Lefebvre's identification of different forms of rhythms (linear, cyclical, arrhythmic, polyrhythmic, etc.) provides a vocabulary with which to write about rhythms in a given film scene that compliments the cinematic terminology already at one's disposal. It is essential that the rhythm analyst of cinema remembers that the rhythms of everyday life captured on screen are transformed and augmented by the cinematic rhythms of editing. Rhythms – like objects – on screen never reach the viewer wholly unmediated.

Materialist methodologies

These three methodologies (thing theory, ANT and rhythm analysis) share a common focus upon material reality, making them well adapted to examining how animations can, with little to no dialogue or narration, communicate political ideas. If human identity and politics are rooted in the external world of objects and things, then any academic discussion of ideology must also build its arguments from the ground-up, instead of imposing pre-existent frameworks onto the material, top-down. Thing theory, ANT and rhythm analysis are united by the emphasis they place upon the non-human. All three methodologies are materialist, but have different conceptions of what constitutes the material world and how best to approach it.

Thing theory is materialist because it insists that the material history of objects/things is essential to understanding how they operate in a text. Thing theory refuses to treat objects/things symbolically before first interrogating their materiality. This interest in illuminating the hidden histories of power adhering within consumer goods and commodities stems from a Marxist-materialistic engagement with socio-political realities. Thing theory allows things to be read semiotically, but it also insists that things are not mere signifiers. Things may function ideologically, but their material existence is not negated by ideology.

ANT, meanwhile, is materialist due to its foundational principle that the everyday relations of things must never be ignored or distorted in order to better fit a pre-existing ideological imperative. Latour's admonition that the researcher must avoid framing concepts such as 'nature' or 'culture' to bolster his/her argumentation is materialist since it insists the actor-network-theorist must work with stuff *as is*. A theorist who subscribes to ANT's critical assumptions must resist any tendency to elevate certain 'actants'¹⁴ above others. Like thing theory, ANT is concerned with narratives of history and labour, especially when they give rise to universal truth claims, of which ANT is sceptical. Furthermore, ANT is concerned with those non-human actors/objects that go unnoticed by other critical theories. It is fundamentally a materialist position to claim a stone is always an object worthy of analysis.

The writings of Henri Lefebvre are indebted to Marxist scientific-materialism. However, Lefebvre's work represents a departure from a dialectical methodology in favour of a mode of analysis that emphasizes the tripartite structure of melody, harmony and rhythm. As such, instead of focusing upon ideological oppositions that clash violently until a point of eventual synthesis, Lefebvre's writings tend to assume a greater sense of balance/harmony between competing impulses which – while often distorted or transfigured by political systems – are grounded in the natural or material world. For Lefebvre, discussing ideology entails discussing daily-lived life as it is experienced at ground level in the midst of things. Lefebvre's output is, therefore, more consistently materialist than many Marxist thinkers', since he is reluctant to use ideological abstractions to illustrate a point if concrete examples can be found. He tends to work from the micro upwards, rather than from the macro

downwards – a tendency shared by thing theorists who analyse a single object or actor-network-theorists who interrogate a single actant.

Applying these methodologies to film studies, one must work upwards from the films themselves, attending closely to scenes and avoiding using films as case studies to fit any a priori framework or ideological assumptions. Thing theory bids the film academic to work from objects/things on screen and resist the temptation to draw symbolic readings before their materiality is considered. Both ANT and rhythmanalysis require the academic to respond moment-by-moment to ever-shifting networks of interconnected rhythms and actants, both on screen and off. If such analysis remains partial and fragmentary, this is because it seeks to describe systems neither closed nor completed. Politically this accords with an anarchist sensibility which resists authoritarian truth claims. A fragment of rhetoric from turn-of-the-century French anarchist Zo d'Axa chimes with resonance at this juncture, though d'Axa was referring to political theories, rather than academic ones:

There is no Absolute. If the facts lead us today to specify such and such a way to see and be, every day, in the lively articles of our expressive collaborators, our determination has been clearly affirmed ... Up till now nothing has revealed to us the radiant beyond. Nothing has given us a constant criterion. Life's panorama changes without ceasing, and the facts appear to us under a different light depending on the hour. We will never react against the attractions of contradictory points of view.¹⁵

This ground level, context-dependent, improvisatory approach to problem-solving is common to each of my chosen methodologies and allows for a partial synthesis of methods, in which the conclusions of any one theory might overlap with another or even offer a provocative contradiction.

Although this book's configuration of a tripartite methodology of thing theory, ANT and rhythmanalysis is unique, the attempt to forge a mode of film analysis that respects the materiality of the material depicted on screen, while simultaneously recognizing that an audience's ideological projections alter their reading of this material, is not unique and has its roots in both the materialist film theory of Siegfried Kracauer and the affective/phenomenological writings of academics including Laura Marks and Vivian Sobchack.

A brief history of Czech animation

Pre-Second World War Czech animation

The history of Czech animation has roots in both the formal experimentation of the interwar European avant-garde and the commercial imperatives of advertising films. While it might be assumed the two roots were ideologically divergent, they connected at the level of production in the form of Karel Dodal's and Irena Dodalová's IRE-Film studio in Prague.¹⁶ Examining these films it quickly becomes apparent that the relationship between avant-gardism and advertising was co-dependent and reciprocal. The colourful abstraction characteristic of German *absolute film* can be seen in the Dodal's advertisement for *Telefunken* radio receivers in *The Wizard of Tones* (*Čaroděj tónů*, 1936), while non-commercial abstract films like *Erotic Fantasy* (*Fantasie érotique*, 1937) and *Ideas in Search of Light* (*Myslenka hledající světlo*, 1938) possess the hypnotic rhythms that led advertising psychologists like Käthe Kurtzig and Hanns Kropff to admire absolute films for their affective impact upon a viewer-consumer.¹⁷

Across the mid-1930s IRE-Film produced over two dozen advertisements for domestic products, from footwear (*Dobyvatel srdcí*, 1934; *Tajemství lucerny*, 1938; *Od rána do noci ve skvělých botách od Papeže*, 1938) and fountain pens (*Člověče, nezlob se!*, 1934) to mouthwash (*Gibbs zubní mýdlo*, 1935) and motor oil (*Protest*, 1938).¹⁸ Jean Ann Wright incorrectly names *The Lantern's Secret* as the first Czech animated film, which might be due to her dating its release as 1935 rather than 1938 as more commonly attributed (see above).¹⁹ However, she is correct to situate the origins of Czech animation further back than the twentieth century within the country's tradition of puppet theatre.²⁰ Indeed, a number of live-action (non-animated) puppet films predate the Dodal's first graphical animations by several years. In the early 1930s Czech puppeteer Josef Skupa directed two films starring his popular marionette characters Spejbl and Hurvínek, *Spejbl's Case* (*Spejblův případ*, 1930) and *Spejbl's Fascination with Film* (*Spejblovo filmové opojení*, 1931).²¹ Skupa's assistant and apprentice was Jiří Trnka, whose largely stop-motion puppet films are the principal subject of this book's first chapter. In fact, Trnka designed and carved the puppet of Hurvínek for the third Spejbl

and Hurvínek film, *The Adventures of a Ubiquitous Fellow* (*Všudybylovo dobrodružství*, 1936) which was directed and written not by Skupa but by the Dodals.²²

Post-Second World War Czech animation

Ateliér Filmových triků was a film studio in Prague, founded in 1935, which produced models, special effects and animated titles for live-action films.²³ Seized by Nazi leader Joseph Pfister in 1941 it was used during the war as the animation department for Prag-Film. Shut down in the autumn of 1944, surviving staff were rehired by Trnka at the end of the war in 1945 when he co-founded his own company, the punningly named 'Trick Brothers' (*Bratři v triku*) studio.

Trnka, however, is but one of the two most significant Czech animators of this period. The second was Karel Dodal's first wife, Hermína Týrlová, whose career, spanning from 1928 to 1986, far out-stripped that of her ex-husband. Like the Dodals, Týrlová tended to structure her films around everyday domestic items, but while the Dodals's largely graphical animations sought to advertise these household goods, Týrlová's stop-motion films brought these objects to life. In opposition to Trnka's studio in Prague, Týrlová operated from Tomas Bata's film studio in Zlín, where she lived until the end of her life. Týrlová's still underappreciated work is also discussed in Chapter 1.

While Týrlová had worked upon *The Lantern's Secret* with her ex-husband, she produced her first puppet film independently from Dodal in 1944, the whimsical children's short animation *Ferda the Ant* (*Ferda mravenec*) in collaboration with Ladislav Zástěra. The following year, another significant figure of Czech animation associated with the Zlín studio, Karel Zeman, directed *A Christmas Dream* (*Vánoční sen*, 1945) in collaboration with his brother Bořivoj.²⁴ Karel Zeman's cinema is especially notable for its technical innovations. In films like *The Fabulous World of Jules Verne* (*Vynález zkázy*, 1958) and *The Fabulous Baron Munchausen* (*Baron Prášil*, 1961) Zeman and his collaborators used matte work and other animation compositing techniques to fully integrate live actors into environments that resembled Victorian etchings. These films, like those of American stop-motion animator Ray Harryhausen, are flights of history fantasy and rarely reflect directly

upon contemporary themes. As with the animator Stanislav Látal, Zeman's output was generally aimed towards a family audience, which partly explains its lack of social commentary. Indeed, a wealth of animation (puppet, stop-motion and traditional hand-drawn animation) was produced for children across the twentieth century in Czechoslovakia. The Zlín International Film Festival for Children and Youth (*Mezinárodní festival filmů pro děti a mládež*) – which continues to this day – was established in 1961 and screened children's films by the likes of Zeman, Látal, Týrlová, Trnka and Jindřich Polák.

Doubtlessly the most famous Czech animated character is the ubiquitous Krtek, a curious, enthusiastic and often highly resourceful and cooperative little mole, created by animator Zdeněk Miler. Riikka Palonkorpi, writing on the Krtek films, describes Miler's work as championing perceived communist virtues of selflessness and hard work.²⁵ She notes that these values are communicated through the films' aesthetics rather than words, thus making them accessible to children.²⁶ This suggests that the avoidance of dialogue and narration in more explicitly political Czech animated films aimed towards adult audiences was not simply an avoidance of censorship but also a formal technique practised by children's animators at the *Bratři v triku* and Zlín studios, most of whom would have also worked upon films not specifically for children.

Palonkorpi recognizes television as one of the most important distribution channels for Miler's Krtek films, noting that 'regular television broadcasting began in 1953, not long after the establishment of socialism in Czechoslovakia.'²⁷ Through the 1960s to the late 1990s, numerous children's animations were produced for and broadcast upon the state channels *Československá televize* (ČST) Praha and ČST Bratislava. Along with Krtek the Mole, there were animations featuring Jiří Šalamoun's canine character *Maxipes Fik*, Adolf Born's schoolchildren with a magical telephone receiver, Mach and Šebestová, and Lubomír Beneš's clumsy handymen Pat and Mat. Many of these shows were screened during the children's evening programme *Večerníček* (aka 'Little Eveninger'), which might be considered the Czech equivalent to the British children's TV series *Jackanory* (BBC, 1965–96).

The relationship between the KSČ and the Czech animation industry was rather more multifaceted and ambivalent than might at first be presumed.

Lucie Joschko and Michael Morgan point out that the nationalization of Czech animation studios was voluntarily initiated²⁸ by animators including Jiri Brdecka, Stanislav Latal and Josef Kluge in 1945, some three years before the coup d'état, which solidified power gained by the KSČ and Klement Gottwald in the legal elections of 1946. Indeed, some animators like Miler were card-carrying members of the Party (until the 1970s at least, when he stopped paying his fees)²⁹ and, for all that others like Trnka were subjected to censorship, this must be weighed against the fact that Czech animation experienced significant growth under communism, with films gaining international recognition at film festivals as exemplars of Czech cultural achievement.³⁰ Even the regime's censorship was less unified and homogenous than might be assumed. Palonkorpi uses the example of a KSČ censor objecting to Krtek on the grounds that his garden was infested with moles as evidence that censorship could sometimes be more personal and subjective than strictly ideological.³¹ Joschko and Morgan, meanwhile, highlight that censors were ideologically, not artistically, trained and, as such, would sometimes disagree with creative decisions due, seemingly, to a lack of imagination or artistic understanding, rather than actual ideological adherence.³²

In terms of responding to this situation, three artistic approaches distinguish themselves. The first was to produce works unlikely to fall foul of the regime's censorship bodies, whether due to ideological adherence or through being resolutely non-political – such films generally falling within the realm of children's or educational films. The second was to produce political allegories so broad and universal in their messaging and approach that it would be hard for the regime to argue that the work was counter-revolutionary or otherwise ideologically suspect. The third was to produce work subtly critical of the regime, but using deft visual allegory rather than verbal communication in the hope that censorship would be avoided. Of course, most animators fell between these three poles across their careers, sometimes switching between approaches. However, ostensibly this book is concerned with those animators who regularly took the third path. Briefly now, two animators who tended towards one of the other two approaches will be touched upon, Garik Seko and Bretislav Pojar; then finally, a third – Václav Mergl – whose filmography encompasses in micro the range of Czech animation produced under communist rule.

Seko, Pojar and Mergl

Since stop-motion animation composes the core of this project, the films of Garik Seko may seem like a curious omission. However, Seko was a formalist – his films are concerned with the pleasures of animation itself and do not tend towards political allegory. His animations that depict myths belonging to Czech culture, such as a short piece about the ‘Faust House’ of Prague (Faustuv dům, 1977), are relatively ‘straight’ historical works, offering little commentary on Czech national identity. Later works like *Ex libris* (1983) or *Shoe Shoe* (*Shoe show aneb botky mají pré*, 1984) are playful films for an adult audience, including mild innuendo, but little to no political content.

The remarkably prolific Bretislav Pojar produced much beautiful work, worthy of its own study. Unlike Seko, his works were often political, but universal in intent. His films cover topics including the destructiveness of war (*Bomb Mania/Bombománie*, 1960; *Balablok*, 1972; *B.O.O.M./Bum*, 1979; *If/Kdyby*, 1983), the means by which human perception is constructed (*Psychocratie/To See or Not to See*, 1969; *E*, 1981) and the relationship between humans and animals (*The Lion and the Song/Lev a písnička*, 1959; *Darwin Anti-Darwin/Darwin Antidarwin aneb co zízala netusila*, 1969). Like Trnka, Pojar directed several works for children (often featuring two brown bears) and later produced educational films with the financial support of the National Film Board of Canada.

Václav Mergl’s graduating film was an abstract animation called *Transformations* (1964) that recalled the absolute cinema of the Dodals, which characterized the earliest days of Czech animation in the 1930s. Following *The Study of Touch* in 1966, he produced the dystopian graphical animation *Laokoon* (1970), which has stylistic affinities with the collagist works of Jan Švankmajer. *Kraby* (*The Crabs*, 1976) is an anti-war allegory of the kind Pojar tended to produce, only safe from censorship due to its universal meaning. Later, *Homunculus* (*Homunkulus*, 1984) recalls the eclectic formal experimentation of both Garik Seko and Jirí Barta, the latter of whom Mergl would collaborate upon *The Last Theft* (*Poslední lup*, 1987). Like Barta, Mergl has also occasionally moved into making animations for children and, like Miler and Beneš, has produced work for Czech TV. As such, a reader new to Czech animation, but overwhelmed by where to start, could gain a comprehensive overview of its stylistic terrain through watching Mergl’s short but impressive filmography.