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History Reloaded: The Communist Past in Digital Space[1]

Abstract

The study focuses on creative approaches to digitised audiovisual material with history-related content, both archival sources and professional arts production. User practice is conceptualized as *appropriation*, which allows inclusion of many different modes from mere sharing of material under one's title and description, through more or less sophisticated remix, to digital manipulation and deepfakes. Applying critical discourse analysis on a selected volume of examples dealing with the Communist history in East-Central Europe, the study offers a historical interpretation of new phenomena connected with general accessibility and pervasive use of the technology by individuals and institutions, as they relate to the nature of human memory and historical consciousness, but also to the historical and archival expertise and curation practice.

Keywords
online culture, audiovisual remediation, online appropriation, memory of Communist past

Klíčová slova
digitální kultura, audiovizuální remediace, online apropriace, paměť komunistické minulosti

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The Digital Turn has transformed, inter alia, the work of a historian. In 2015, the community of historians applauded Sheila Fitzpatrick's book *On Stalin's Team*, a fascinating record of communication within the Soviet leader's inner circle from the 1930s onward. It is

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based on a collection of written notes exchanged between the members of the circle.[2] The approval was also driven by the traditional and, indeed, exclusive, nature of the sources Fitzpatrick used: historians are trained in their critique and analysis. There is a prevailing belief that historiographical methods are essentially fit to cope with them. Contrary to that, any more contemporary subject of study brings up the dilemma of the amount, the general accessibility, complexity and challenging authenticity of emails, tweets and other digital communication, of various sorts of media appearances, and — what is an utterly new dimension — their re-published, shared and digitally manipulated versions. Sources from earlier periods are not saved either: amateur archives of digitised historical photos and videos pop up every minute in the digital space. Ad-hoc virtual communities are built around individual posts, their spatial, temporary or other contexts. Far from merely posing fundamental questions of authenticity and relevance in historical analysis, the phenomenon of a digital life of documents and sources presents new dilemmas in curation of historical sources.

This study explores an illustrative example of a digital life-after-life of the originally pre-digital history, namely of the many often contradictory aspects of the Communist dictatorships in Czechoslovakia and other countries in East-Central Europe. They encompass a wide range of topics such as the oppression of opponents, official presentation of political leaders, and the aesthetics of public space and consumer life.

The interaction between digital technology and the historical interpretation of Communist dictatorships has been neglected as an object of local scholarly discussion so far, reducing the problem to generally shared belief into the digital as a politically neutral technological instrument of curation and analysis within so called digital humanities.[3] Yet in a recent study on the Czech story of the digitization of the archival materials of the State Security (Státní bezpečnost, StB), the historian Vítězslav Sommer described "digital utopia" built around the issue, according to which "every citizen would, from the comfort of his or her home and using his or her computer, study documents on Communist repression, learn the truth about the past and embrace its correct interpretation". This was how it was expected to finally reach the public "coming to terms with the Communist past".[4] Sommer showed that, after the digitization project became the flagship of the archives' institutionalization at the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, its generous public funding and a powerful political baking turned the seemingly neutral technology into an instrument producing a dominating interpretation of the past, which saw the repressive policies as the fundamental, if not only characteristic of Communism.

While Sommer's study identifies the *politics of history* that different actors practiced while drawing public attention to digital technology, the present study focuses on popular approaches and their implications for general social phenomena such as *historical con-*

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2)   Sheila Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). Czech translation: Sheila Fitzpatricková, *Ve Stalinově týmu: Roky riskantního života v sovětské politice* (Praha: Argo, 2018).

3)   See e.g. Digital Humanities portal, run by the Czech Academy of Sciences, accessed November 24, 2021, https://digitalhumanities.cz/.

4)   Vítězslav Sommer, "Decommunization as a digital utopia: Digitization of the communist State Security archives in the Czech Republic," *Střed / Centre* 13, no. 1 (2021), 82–112.

sciousness and *collective memory*. In doing so, it can make use of parts of existing social-science production dealing with online remediation and digital culture in general and their effects on shaping historical memory and identity. Andrew Hoskins devoted numerous studies and edited volumes to the phenomenon, introducing a number of concepts explaining the transformed relationship between media and memory (*connective turn, networked memory*) as well as the shift from the individual as a consumer of media to one complemented by a role of producer and active user (*produsage, participatory media*).[5] He argues that the turn brings an ontological shift in what memory is and what memory does, paradoxically both arresting and unmooring the past. Memory is liberated from the traditional spatial archive and from institutions in general; it can be distributed between brains, but "this opening up of new ways of finding, sorting, sifting, using, seeing, losing and abusing the past, both imprisons and liberates active human remembering and forgetting."[6]

The present study further refers to the extensive debate that has evolved around the question how memory of specific pasts or particular events transforms through digital technology. Alison Landsberg introduced the metaphor of *prosthetic memory* to describe the mass-media production and dissemination of memory, in which it has become possible to have an intimate relationship to memories of events through which one did not live. Prosthetic memories *are* personal, as they derive from engagement with mediated representations of the past. Like an artificial body part, they are interchangeable and exchangeable. They are even not geographically specific or serve to reinforce a group identity. Individuals can only share them with others, but their meanings can never be completely stabilised.[7] The question of changing temporal and spatial boundaries of historical events is also important for Roger I. Simon, who tried to prove that digital technologies offer a productive space for assembling diverse groups of people to engage in an interactive practice of *remembering together*. He analysed the recent social-media discourse about the 1984 disaster of the gas leak in Bhopal, India. The practice of remembering together has produced vast numbers of sites, social network profiles, blogs etc., people were put in relation as they expressed and remade their connection to the historical event and each other. It is remarkable that the reflectivity characteristic for the communication about the event is not a dialogue: the posts are not contingent on the substance of the previous ones, as would be the case in a conversation. And yet, there is an extent of emotional continuity, the sense of "just remembrance", and a particular sense of commonality.[8] Andrew Hoskins recently joined the discussion by drawing attention to the fact that individuals

5) Andrew Hoskins, "Digital Network Memory," in *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, eds. Astrid Erll and Anne Rigney (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 91–106; Andrew Hoskins, ed., *Digital Memory Studies: Media Pasts in Transition* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018).

6) Hoskins, ed., *Digital Memory Studies*, 1.

7) Alison Landsberg, "Prosthetic memory: the ethics and politics of memory in an age of mass culture," in *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003), 144–161. See also her book Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia UP, 2004).

8) Roger I. Simon, "Remembering together: social media and the formation of the historical present," in *Heritage and Social Media: Understanding heritage in a participatory culture,* ed. Elisa Giaccardi (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2012), 89–106.

and groups feel active in participatory media: "But it is precisely that feeling of being active that hides the actual loss of control over what is in effect a convergence of communication with archive and […] the culture of digital search." Following the argument, he went as far as declaring a "new memory boom of the self".[9]

The present study examines the contemporary transformations of historical consciousness and memory of the past through exploring creative approaches to digitised audiovisual material with history-related content, archival sources and professional arts production. The user practice is conceptualized as *appropriation*, which enables inclusion of a number of different modes from mere sharing of material under a title and description, through sophisticated remix, to digital manipulation and deepfakes. Applying critical discourse analysis on a selected volume of examples, the study articulates historical interpretation of new phenomena connected with general accessibility and pervasive use of the technology by individuals and institutions that relate to the nature of human memory and historical consciousness, and to the historical and archival expertise and curation practice. It addresses the following questions: What strategies do creative users apply when appropriating the material? Do various forms of appropriation of audiovisual footage cause shifts in the established historical narratives? If so, what kind of shifts are they? Does the memory of historical events change in the digital era? What are the effects of all this for historical expertise and archival practice?

In this study, the analysed corpus of videos will be exemplified through representatives of four types of appropriations that had been identified. The examples will be approached with an analytical toolkit inspired by the critical discourse analysis.[10] Appropriation is examined in terms of social practice and the link is sought between the communication code, the ideological message included, and the historical context and factography. Comparing the original and the appropriation-related mutation, the study tracks the transformation of content, form, and position. The approach shares the interest in the range of creative strategies with media anthropologists.[11] Yet it does not take the size of viewership, the specific online platform, or the extent of professionalism in the appropriation into ac-

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9) Andrew Hoskins, "Digital media and the precarity of memory," in *Collaborative Remembering: Theories, Research, and Applications*, eds. Michelle L. Meade, Celia B. Harris, Penny Van Bergen, John Sutton and Amanda J. Barnier (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), 371–385, quote from 378 and 380. Cf. Wulf Kansteiner, "Transnational Holocaust Memory, Digital Culture and the End of Reception Studies," in *The Twentieth Century in European Memory: Transcultural Mediation and Reception,* eds. Tea Sindbæk Andersen and Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 305–343. For the reception of the theoretical concepts in East European context see also Ellen Rutten, Julie Fedor and Vera Zvereva, eds., *Memory, Conflict and New Media: Web Wars in Post-Socialist States* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2013); Mykola Makhortykh, "Remediating the past: YouTube and Second World War memory in Ukraine and Russia," *Memory Studies* 13, no. 2 (2020), 146–161.

10) The toolkit has been designed by Irena Reifová, Assistant Professor of media studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University. Her references to Ruth Wodak, Norman Fairclough, and Teun van Dijk as well as the toolkit design have been discussed and tested during the "Remediace audiovizuálního dědictví v prostředí online populární kultury" workshop at the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Science on March 25, 2019.

11) The anthropological approach has been summarized by another colleague in the project: Abby S. Waysdorf, "Remix in the age of ubiquitous remix," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 20, no. 4 (2021), 1129–1144.

count. The main focus remains the identification of how historical themes are employed and their interpretations altered more-or-less (sub)consciously, and what it says about the current nature of relating to the past, its socially constitutive power, and the historical expertise.

1. Appropriating established narratives

Originally, the pop song *Naše cesty* [Our journeys] by Marek Ztracený[12] had nothing to do with Communism or history in general. Its lyrics consist of unspecific phrases about human dedication to love and the need to seek it in a relationship, no matter how complicated the route may be: "Na cestě klikatý, / jsme jenom já a ty, / nesmíme zastavit, / jestli chceme mít klid" [Along the curvy road / just you and I / We mustn't stop / If we wish for some peace]. The professional team behind the official video decided to accompany the broad lyrics with filmed scenes explicitly referring to a politically motivated escape from Communist Czechoslovakia. A young attractive couple struggles through the forests of South-Western Bohemia, drawn by the idea of freedom in the West and pursued by border guards. While one of the guards lets them flee, the voiceover says the song is dedicated to those who were not this lucky, and summarizes the atrocities "caused by Communism".

In the comments bellow the official YouTube post, the audience responded in exactly the projected manner. Viewers appreciated it both as "an adorable song" and "an important memento". While showing disdain for Communism in general, they expressed joy that "that world" was gone.[13]

Rather than an existing footage it is an established narrative what is appropriated here. Hence, the video managed to build a link between the song and the idea of overcoming a deplorable chapter in the history of Czechoslovakia. It enabled the vocalist along with the audience to identify with those who attempted to escape and aspired for freedom. In this case, professional film-making and a positive narrative were involved. In other instances, the narrative can be more critical. For example, the video by Czech singer-songwriter Xindl X, accompanying his song Čecháček a totáček [The Petty Czech and Petty Totality], depicts a common civic conformity under Socialism through visual tricks of multiplication and associates it with the present-day political nostalgia for Communism.[14] Far more frequently though, pop music consumers share songs that do not include any historical reference on their profiles and add the context by themselves, inspired by a current anniversary of an event, somebody's family history under Communism, or driven by disenchantment with current politics.

What all examples of this type of appropriation have in common is that historical accuracy does not matter: in the case of the filmed escape, the formal visual attributes, the

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12) "Marek Ztracený — Naše cesty (oficiální video)," YouTube, 2019, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KzEdxAPNAiM&list=RDEM98mIRiclyqqtqsAjnReVEA&start_radio=1.

13) Ibid.

14) "Xindl X — Čecháček a totáček," YouTube, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ko8NsZtqw38.

outfit of the couple, their car, and even the uniforms refer to the period of the late Social-ism, i.e. the 1970s or 1980s, while the escape by walking through the border almost exclu-sively took place at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s, before the Iron Curtain was complet-ed. The visual style evokes the Socialist period, while the general attributes, such as the barbed wire, armed border guards etc., draw attention through their moral connotation. The simplicity and familiarity of the narrative are the keys to building its connection to the song, what makes its commercial or emotional exploitation feasible.

2. Appropriating the archival footage

The well-known Červený Hrádek Speech by the then Communist Party Secretary General Miloš Jakeš played an important role during the summer and autumn of 1989, when it contributed to the radicalization of anti-Communist sentiments in Czech society. Curi-ously enough, the footage had been widely "shared" and publicly circulating long before the digital era, although the analogue technology only enabled copying audio cassettes and playing them at private gatherings. What remained hidden from the audience then and what is not a part of the established collective memory of the event is that the "speech" was a remix, a heavily edited version of a short statement by Jakeš and the following Q&A session at a meeting of regional party officials held in a culture centre at the outskirts of the city of Pilsen on July 7, 1989. The event was recorded by a professional crew of Czechoslo-vak Television and briefly featured in the evening news. Yet a copy of the full audiovisual footage was appropriated and edited by a member of the crew.[15] The most eccentric foot-age — where the leader mixed up terms and sounded confused and overall funny — were removed from the video track and leaked as an audio recording. Jakeš intended to speak openly to his kin on politically sensitive issues such as the petition *Několik vět* [A Few Sen-tences] and its wide support, including that by a number of popular singers and actors. The edited version, on the contrary, made an impression of the Secretary General engag-ing in an unintended poor stand-up comedy. More generally, it potentially showed a spir-itual and political degeneration of the Communist Party and its apparatus.

It was this version that was understood as an authoritative source that was quoted, ap-propriated and further modified. In the early 1990s, a project by earlier new-wave band Ratataplán (also known as Pravda) produced a music remix, using dub rhythm, several iconic sentences from the Červený Hrádek Speech, picking up and looping words or phrases. The *Žádnej z nás* [None of Us] vinyl single is still available on second-hand sites. Twenty years later, the music remix was posted on YouTube, without a date or information on its genesis.[16] In most comments, viewers did not refer to the actual remix, its political and music context, but to history in general. Compared to 1989, the interpretation shifts

15) Even detailed accounts of the event omit the act of editing the footage and keep referring to it as Jakeš's speech, e.g. "Reportéři ČT," Česká televize, 16. 11. 2009, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.ceskate-levize.cz/ivysilani/1142743803-reporteri-ct/209452801240043/titulky/. Cf. the official report published in 1989: Václav Pergl, "Potřebujeme tvořivé myšlení a šikovné ruce," *Rudé právo*, July 18, 1989, 1–2.
16) "Pravda — Lidé bděte! (1991) — Žádnej z nás (remix)," YouTube, 2010, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIu_CxQYedo.

toward a more tolerant, entertained tone: "Yeah, we must have this recording on a cassette home somewhere [meaning the "original" of the Červený Hrádek Speech]. Great memories :)".[17] The audiovisual footage edited in 1989 was also shown by Czech and Slovak TV on the so-called Velvet Night show in 1999, commemorating the 10th anniversary of the democratic revolution in Czechoslovakia. Short clips from these have been digitised, further edited, and put online under titles and descriptions by individual users. Yet again, unlike in 1989, the clips are viewed with amusement, or even astonishment: Jakeš and Late Socialism now seem more open than traditionally perceived, and their economic ideas even inspiring: "Yes, he was right. Just a pity he came up with these too late."[18] The content and the form remain the same, while the ideological position of the appropriator shifts substantially.

Speeches by Communist leaders are a welcome source for digital user creativity.[19] In this respect, Gustáv Husák, Communist Party Secretary General in 1969–1987 and Czechoslovak President 1975–1989, enjoys a prominent place in digital space. His New-Year addresses from 1976 to 1989 have been edited into a 36-second statement to evoke the idea of stagnation and a lack of invention in the period.[20] A number of his speeches at Communist Party Congresses have been re-dubbed to refer to Communist atrocities or, ironically, to forecast post-1989 developments and the decay of the present-day political establishment.[21] In the *Husák Dancing* video, the kick-off is a short section of one of Husák's excellent, charismatic speeches in 1968, when he asserts the right of the Communists to defend their position within the context of the Prague Spring reforms, once "everybody else got the right to speak out". Yet, it continues with clips from the late 1980s, to confront the assertive defence of Communists with scenes of various meetings expressing unanimous support to the Party, and footage of beating and detaining anti-Communist demonstrators. The accompanying melody of "Be my, be my baby, be my little baby" by the Ronnettes fittingly contrasts with the police using water cannons against protesters.[22] Curiously enough, it is this, relatively sophisticated remix that provoked some serious debate among the commenting viewers on which achievements of the Prague Spring Husák actually tried to defend by his twist away from a reformist politician to the proponent of the so-called Normalization.

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17) Ibid.

18) "Milouš Jakeš na Červeném Hrádku — 17. 7. 1989," YouTube, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_e5hfcohY_U, the comment is from discussion at "Milouš Jakeš 1989 Červený hrádek — ekonomické otázky, sestřih," YouTube, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkVvPLXN2xo.

19) This is true also for much larger national and language communities. For example, a highly popular Russian musician and youtuber Enjoykin mixed Leonid Brezhnev's speeches with his own music: "Enjoykin — Дорогие Юные Друзья," YouTube, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-Y2OCyk-Pc.

20) "Gustáv Husák — Novoroční projevy 1976–1989 — unikátní a zábavný sestřih," accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QiBm4YX9y24.

21) E.g. "Gustav Husak," YouTube, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IoONg_-PVM. "GUSTAV HUSÁK," YouTube, 2011, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQ092rRTrfE.

22) "Husák dancing," YouTube, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUXqe8ikpgU.

The Czech video re-mediation scene also includes a case remotely reminiscent of the international popularity of the clip from the *Downfall*,[23] with Hitler shouting at his officers, that has been re-used many times by adding subtitles that deal with up-to-date and often highly profane issues which can produce a strong comical effect. A similar effect is regularly achieved by editing the visual track of a scene from one episode of *Thirty Cases of Major Zeman*,[24] a prominent Socialist-era TV thriller series. The first version of the remake was produced professionally in 1994 as part of the political satire *Česká soda* [Czech Soda]. While in the original the Communist detectives watched the documentation of their criminal object of investigation, in the remix their repulsed comments — such as "I've never seen anything like that. He's a monster, not a human." or "Look at him. This is an experienced trickster." — aimed at the then Czech Prime Minister Václav Klaus whose footage of playing the harmonica was edited in.[25] Since then the criminal has been replaced by other politicians, both Czech and Slovak, as well as by non-political, yet ill-famed figures.[26]

Yet the intriguing phenomenon is the completely new "charge" of the scene. The original *Major Zeman* series from the 1970s was made to promote a radical post-1968 (i.e. hard-line Communist) interpretation of key events of post-war Czechoslovak history, and was directly supervised by the Ministry of Interior and the Communist Party. According to the series, the Socialist collectivization of agriculture faced armed insurgents that the policemen had to find; the dissidents were depicted as layabouts and drug addicts, but many of the episodes made up good action thrillers, even with a horror-movie touch. This top example of — high-quality — Communist propaganda provoked a heated discussion in the 1990s about whether it should be allowed to appear on TV again. Yet, after scandalizing the Czech public service TV for running it, several private channels benefited from its popularity.[27] What is more important, however, is that within the remix, the detectives, who are members of the infamous State Security, have become morally neutral, the context of the series has turned comical, rather than political, and it is the previous Prime Minister, rather than the Communist propaganda that is the object of parody.[28] A major revision not only of the original narrative from the 1970s, but also of the radical anti-Communist perspective of the 1990s.

The second type of popular re-mediations has demonstrated that remix is not exclusive to the digital era. What the whole corpus of videos seems to suggest as characteristic

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23) *Der Untergang* (Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2004).

24) *Třicet případů majora Zemana* (Jiří Sequens, 1974–1979).

25) Česká soda X. (Petr Čtvrtníček, Milan Šteindler, 1994). The clip is available as "Major Zeman: Václav Klaus (Česká soda)," YouTube, 2011, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NL131-iixY.

26) "Major Zeman vers Babiš," YouTube, 2017, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zih3WkmcxHk. "Lhář Michal Hašek kontra major Zeman," YouTube, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SeY8O4uiTfo. "Pirát silnic Trpišovský — Major Zeman parody," YouTube, 2011, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-5z9BZmj-o. "Major Zeman sa hnevá na Kapitána Danka," YouTube, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xd8d79qMB5o.

27) Jan Zápotocký, "Seriál Třicet případů majora Zemana po roce 1989: jeho revitalizace, reflexe a deideologizace [Thirty Cases of Major Zeman after 1989: The Series' Revitalization, Reflection and De-Ideologization]" (Unpublished MA thesis, FSV UK, 2013).

for contemporary creative strategies though is the decreasing need to be original. Just the opposite, it is even better if the object of your remix is known and the remediation repeats the same joke. Nonetheless, changing some parts of the form of a well-known footage, i.e. adding a different sound, subtitles, or changing a part of the video track, very easily shifts the content connotations, foregrounds and backgrounds different content particles, and thus transforms the message.

3. The remix wars

There are two further methods of using the digital technology for re-mediating audio-visual content relating to the Communist past that deserve a brief mention. The first one will be illustrated by a clash of amateur video compilations that address the unsettling case of the Mašín brothers of the early 1950s, its exploitation by political elites, and the uncertain position of the Czech public toward it. As was most recently shown by Jaroslav Pinkas, within his treatise on how to approach the case and its memory in teaching history at schools, even though the Mašín story has been researched thoroughly by historians, some parts of their story make it one of the most controversial issues in the Czech public debate on post-war history.[29]

The interpretation of the insurgence and the violent escape of the group to West Berlin has attracted a number of audiovisual contesters.[30] The costs, including casualties, of their insurgent activity are the centre of the argument. One position appreciates the Mašín family and their part in anti-Nazi resistance during WWII, but wavers when it comes to killing a number of people while fleeing Czechoslovakia. The other position in the conflict, very much in line with how the Mašín brothers themselves legitimized their conduct, suggests that the early years of Communist dictatorship were a period of war, as declared by the Communist Party on non-Communists, and the Mašíns were legitimate fighters in war, where casualties belong.

All the videos imitate, with varying level of sophistication and technical ability, the traditional genre of documentary film. Some appropriate parts or full versions of documentaries created by Czech Television or other professional productions. Sections of inter-

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28) "Major Zeman vers Babiš," YouTube, 2017, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zih3WkmcxHk.

29) Jaroslav Pinkas, "Případ bratrů Mašínů," in *Třetí odboj v didaktické perspektivě*, ed. Jaroslav Pinkas (Praha: NLN and Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů, 2020), 171–200.

30) E.g. "Bratři Mašínové byli vrazi — dokument SNB," YouTube, 2012, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IeSMLuwkj34. "Bratři Mašínové: hrdinové a partyzáni," YouTube, 2011, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_40RxBGuJc. "Předseda KSČM: Mašínové jsou vrazi a Lenin byl humanista," YouTube, 2011, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yg9ZidRbfj8. "Ocenění pro odbojovou skupinu bratří Mašínů + anketa," YouTube, 2012, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=muKJILE9a0E. "A Tribute to Radek Mašín," YouTube, 2011, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGUpEmvl50Y. "Ctirad Mašín versus poslanec Stanislav Huml," YouTube, 2011, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFtwz-wuhO8. "Suďte je — Mašíni," YouTube, 2009, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lf2tZSGRnwE.

views, news outlets, existing documentary and feature films, but also camera shots of archival documents and photos are pasted together and provided with title cards, reminiscent of silent film. The original source, date, title or copyright of the original footage is never mentioned. It is fascinating that the same content can be used as an argument in support of each of the opposite stances: the photo of Jaroslav Honzátko, the young policeman who had been drugged and killed by the escaping Mašíns, can demonstrate the ruthlessness of the gang, or, in a different compilation, prove that the policeman did not feel any pain and died immediately. The context of neighbouring material is the key: the same photo can be placed next to a scene of a peaceful sunny afternoon in a small town, or next to a footage, taken from a US documentary on Stalinism, with piles of bodies in mass graves somewhere in the Soviet Gulag. In the latter case, a simple black-and-white title card explains: "The Mašín brothers have killed, / rather humanely / !!!only a handful!!!!/ armed guardians of the communist regime." The resulting card points to a Communist Party MP, who engaged in the debate, and claims his lack of humanity as a result of his "not liking the quick, light and painless death of Constable Honzátko".[31]

What we are witnessing is a varying position accompanying a very similar form — the music, for example, seems rather arbitrary, ranging from Mozart's *Requiem* to Tina Turner's *The Best* — and even parts of content. Contrary to the basic impression the videos make and their documentary and argumentative look suggests, most examples in the corpus do not seem to have been produced to actually convince anybody from the opposing camp or to carry on with a debate. Neither do they seek to shift any established historical narrative. Instead, they only put a visual content in a certain context and produce a meaning as a result. Most of the examples collected have been posted on sites whose audience declare their identity in comments or when sharing the material. The videos are designed to strengthen the tie with the story worshipped by the group and to dishonest those who disagree. In this respect, they are worth comparing to other fan cultures explored in this special issue of *Iluminace* — and to the following, final type of amateur videos.

4. Socialism is beautiful

The last type is especially difficult to tackle, using traditional historiographical concepts and methods. We are clearly witnessing a rise of large participatory cultures around fan-made videos combining special music styles with audiovisual footage from the Socialist era in East-Central Europe, Asia and even Cuba. While the earlier phenomenon of *Ostalgie* had been explained by people's traumatic loss of an existing universe combined with economic difficulties,[32] the current nostalgic communities and their styles are vigorous in a different sense. They play around with excerpted images and even ideological messages, but these are mostly used as aesthetical ornaments accompanying — and accompanied by —

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31) "Ctirad Mašín versus poslanec Stanislav Huml," YouTube, 2011, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www. youtube.com/watch?v=HFtwz-wuhO8.

32) For summary of the original East German concept and its Czech reception, see Martin Franc, "Ostalgie v Čechách," in *Kapitoly z dějin české demokracie po roce 1989*, eds. Adéla Gjuričová and Michal Kopeček (Prague and Litomyšl: Paseka, 2008), 193–216.

synth music. The vaporwave music style,[33] for example, has found its "socialist" divisions of Laborwave, Sovietwave or even FidelCastroWave fanvid communities. The phenomenon is not exclusive to amateur YouTube channels. A professionally developed and distributed video game *The Workers & Resources: Soviet Republic* was released in 2019. Players can build up their own republic "with a centrally-planned economy and transform a poor country into a rich superpower".[34] Not only does such admiration for the beauty of Socialist-era manufacturing or large-scale farming seem to be a major retreat from the post-material values and sustainability trends, but, as will be further demonstrated, we are witnessing a new, ideologically highly ambiguous, and strongly aestetized re-mediation of images from Communist dictatorships.

A Laborwave video is made of archival footage or photograph. It is rearranged, set to a vaporwave, synthwave or other song, and altered through the uses of filters to give it a 1980s look, adding pastel colour tones, VHS-style lines or date graphics. This can be done to still portraits of Karl Marx, videos of cars and people moving through East Berlin streets,[35] but even to military parades and war action. As an example of the latter, Abby Waysdorf tried to approach the cluster of "vaporwar" videos within the anthropological part of the CADEAH project. Their makers adhere to a specific vaporwave-inspired style of visual arranging clips of military footage — combat action from the Socialist era, but also real footage from the Yugoslav war in the 1990s. They cut them up and edit to the beat of a song, and add elements associated with vaporwave aesthetic, including that of stylizing the word as "a e s t h e t i c", to mimic vaporwave's drawn-out sound. The author of the study concluded that the focus on aesthetics is the main quality of the videos, and the main evaluative point for viewers. What matters most is that these militaries, either solicited by viewers or found by creators, "look cool": "Essentially, these are videos by military content fans for military content fans."[36]

The matter seems more complicated when exploring historical narratives. With the vaporwar style, that was just mentioned, the whole tragic message of war is missing: the purple colour tone and sluggish music may make one feel the military is "cool", but does not draw viewer attention to who are the men who are being captured in the video and led into a school building or what would happen to them. Taking non-military videos into account does not make the interpretation any easier. The content — form — stance analytical triplet is difficult to use, since even an image with an explicit message or even a slogan does not have to preserve the ideological content traditionally associated with it, or it can still have it on the side of the creator, but not the viewer, or vice versa. Let us take an example from the current Sovietwave style, which combines modern synth music sounding like the 1980s with images from Soviet films, posters and photos.[37] Several video compilations use

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33) "Vaporwave," accessed November 24, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaporwave. Cf. Grafton Tanner, *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and Commodification of Ghoasts* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2016).

34) "The Workers & Resources: Soviet Republic," accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.sovietrepublic.net/.

35) "O S T B E R L I N   1 9 8 9," YouTube, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6K d9zDqXd0.

36) Abby Waysdorf, Vaporwar and Military Contents Fandom. CADEAH Working Paper 2020.

37) E.g. "Our Dream — Sovietwave Mix," YouTube, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/

photos of shabby Socialist residential buildings, factories or public institutions, in deserted landscapes to accompany hours of melancholic Sovietwave music. In some cases, it is the viewers who need to rationalize their position, as in case of a socially critical comment that said: "Nostalgia for the USSR is not nostalgia for the past but for the lost future." — and this single comment got hundreds of likes.[38] And, contrary to that, one can come across a video with a supposedly explicit ideological image — a collage of the waving figure of Fidel Castro, next to a number of white-collar Cuban men with pensive engineer-like looks, all set in purple tone, with an 3D grid connecting them to the mountains on the horizon and the following words in a retro computing font: "Capitalism has neither the capacity, nor the morality, nor the ethics to solve the problems of poverty." The text suggests that the reference to the past is used as comprehensible frame that helps to communicate topical issues of today, namely an explicit anti-capitalist critique. And yet, the few comments just keep a celebratory tone: "Nice video, keep going comrade!"[39] To them, Fidel is an ornament to music.

Conclusion

Historical consciousness is considered a general human competence and proclivity. Historiography expressed its understanding of the relation between history, as an objective idea and special analytical approach, and the subjective perception of the past through the concept of memory. Until recently, it was believed that social groups, influenced by nationalist or socially critical activists, tend to create relatively stable common collective memories. Such imagined bonds have had a far-reaching effect on the political and social history in Central and Eastern Europe. They have played a major role in modern nation-building, in population transfers and expulsions after WWII, or in dismantling the Socialist dictatorships in 1989 and replacing them with a widely shared anti-communist narrative. As Maurice Halbwachs argued in *The Collective Memory*, his seminal work on the concept that this text refers to, the stability, strength and endurance of collective memory is not some accident, but depends upon "an interest, a shared body of concerns and ideas."[40] It is the common interest, a common motivation for remembering and constructing the memory of certain things, while forgetting others that stood behind many social and political movements and conflicts in the 19th and 20th century. A number of contemporary authors, whose ideas are summarized in the introduction, have challenged the traditional concept of collective memory as applicable in the digital era.

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watch?v=DMoCM_FgLP8. Popular Russian playlists also include videos that combine memes and music from Chechen War. The ambiguous message connects with the society's uncertain attitude to the war. See e.g. "Chechen War Doomer Playlist," YouTube, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkWWvbAMXAc.

38) "1 Hour Of Melancholic Sovietwave 2nd Mix," YouTube, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLxj6TbbtDk.

39) "F i d e l   C a s t r o   W a v e — Laborwave, synths and beats against imperialism," YouTube, accessed November 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RNKI79k4Yc.

40) Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 119.

Anti-Communist memory of the Socialist era, that became widely dominant across East-Central Europe after 1989, was still constructed and preserved through the traditional instruments of collective-memory building. The digital technology contributes to a democratization of the memory scene. Yet, the clusters of videos presented in this study were to demonstrate that the digital has transformed the whole framework of historical memory and consciousness, but also of historical sources and expertise. We are challenged by copyright issues and altogether new sites, ways of curation, and many other questions the elaboration of which would go beyond the scope of this article. It focused on the extent to which the technology allows that any aspect of popular appropriation of a historical material — content, form or stance — is respected or changed, codified within a community or played with by each individual user. The following three shifts represent the key trends in transforming the established historical narratives and the emergence of narratives of a new sort.

First, the source and its authenticity tends to become less important to digital users. Contrary to traditional approach to historical material, where taking the source, its author and provenance into account is a necessary aspect of the analysis and of the historical craft, in popular digital appropriation, source is not mentioned, and nobody seems to miss the information. Neither is it necessary that the specific footage is exceptional in any sense. Contrarily, the focus is most often on the familiarity of the footage, or the reference the image invokes. In other words, it has to be familiar to the viewers, then they react to it, share it.

The second tendency is that large parts of historical contexts can be omitted or changed in popular re-use. One can post a photo of a peaceful middle-class neighbourhood in Warsaw taken during WWII or a scene of people sunbathing and playing volleyball at a river bank in Prague in the 1950s, and attract large communities of fans, sharing their exclamations of "envy", happy memories, and desire for the times to return. The historical context of the scenes — the Nazi occupation and the Holocaust, or the Stalinist phase of Czechoslovak Communist dictatorship can be left out from the online situation. Andrew Hoskins coined this principal accident of digital memory as *emergence*: digital technology creates vast potential for the digitized past "to emerge, awaiting (re)discovery, (re)connection and (re)mediation, in unprescribed and unpredictable future times".[41] Yet the inclination can go beyond the missing historical context. In fact, any of the triplet of components tracked by the analysis — i.e. content, form, and position — can be "switched off" and not taken into account, as was the case of the Laborwave video of cars and people moving through East Berlin streets in the late 1980s: no position toward the East German Communist Party was taken by its appropriation, which instead relied solely on its affection for the deserted streets and the pace which fitted the music added in the remix.

Third, new types of consumers of digital historical products seem to arise. As was previously shown, the videos and any other posts aim neither at contributing a rational position to a debate, nor at building a long-term collective memory. And yet, this does not make the resulting group sentiment toward the historical material any weaker. In other words, people build communities around supposedly shared memories, such as escaping

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41) Hoskins, *Digital media and the precarity of memory*, 385.

through the Iron Curtain or being oppressed by Communist police. They tend to identify with such memories, although in technical sense they have nothing in common with them. That is by no means new. In human history, collective memories have routinely been invented and intentionally created to revive or build certain, ethnic, gender, political and other communities. Memories that spread through digital media and social networks — similar to Alison Landsberg's prosthetic memories as well as Roger I. Simon's remembering together, explicated above — are authentically shared thanks to and through one's presence and activity in the digital platform, but without any common social, ethnic, or geographic background. The question of changing temporal and spatial boundaries of historical events seems to be helpful in trying to interpret how the digital media support the formation of new types of consumers and publics by enabling strangers to share their experiences and renegotiate their relations to specific historical events and to each other.

In spite of the popularity of historical subjects in the current digital culture, the actual sense of history seems to diminish. We have new ways of searching, organizing, sharing, and comparing (and manipulating) historical sources. Nonetheless, we also tend to know, learn and (rationally) remember fewer and fewer historical facts. As Andrew Hoskins put it, we replaced memory with a "hyperconnective illusion of an open access world of the availability, accessibility, and reproduceability of the past".[42] The past has been stripped of its previous coherence and stability and replaced by emotionally powerful representations of remembering together. This facilitates identification with those memorialized, yet it is the awareness of the complexities of the past that is at stake.

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